



His Runaway Duchess

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "You're to be my bride. And don't you dare run away from me too, Duchess."

To save her twin sister from an unwanted match, Daphne takes her place at the altar. But the groom recognizes her. Now she has no choice but to run... Only to come across another runaway: A little boy who needs her help...

Reclusive Duke Edward didn't expect a disheveled bride to find his missing son. Or ask for shelter. Forced to stay together for a night, he must keep his distance.

For, the only way to protect her life, and her heart, is to never touch her... Not even when the scandal is out and they find themselves trapped in a marriage of convenience.

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then His Runaway Duchess is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 106

CHAPTER 1

Daphne rested her forehead against the cool glass, tracking individual droplets racing each other down the window.

The rain was coming down heavier than ever, sleeting down the windowpane in a gray veil. Outside, the London streets were slick with water, puddles growing out of the gutters and spreading across the roads.

If the one on the left reaches the bottom before the one on the right, everything will be all right. Emily and I will pack our things and run. I will say something to Mama, tell her the truth, and she will stop all of this.

The right-hand droplet won.

“It’s bad luck, you know,” Emily said, her voice flat and cold. “Rain on one’s wedding day. It’s bad luck. Like leaving the house with your left foot first.”

Daphne twisted around to look at her twin, slumped over on her dressing table.

“You aren’t superstitious, Emily. And you’re left-handed. You do everything with your left foot or hand first.”

“Telling, isn’t it?” Emily lifted her head from the dresser. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, but the tears had stopped. For now, at least. Her spectacles were gone, carefully folded and left on the edge of the dressing table.

Without her spectacles, the two of them looked more alike than ever.

Not today, of course. Emily was trussed up in her wedding finery, drowning in acres of ice-blue satin. A translucent lace veil was wrapped around her elaborate hairstyle and hung down around her head and shoulders, threatening to choke her.

Daphne was suitably inferior today, as befitted a bridesmaid. Her gown was a simple one, the same green as her eyes, with a demure, little posy of flowers to carry.

“You don’t have to do this,” Daphne said after the pause had grown too painful. “Nobody understands why. If I could just tell Mama, or at least Anna, then?—”

“No,” Emily interrupted, shaking her head. “Nobody knows about my secret, and if it came out, I would be ruined. Don’t underestimate him, Daff. He was very clear. I marry him, or he tells everybody and I am ruined. Mama and Anna knowing about it won’t change a thing.”

“But perhaps?—”

“Stop it, Daphne,” Emily burst out, jumping to her feet. She paced up and down the room, hobbled by the stiff, uncomfortable bridal shoes she was wearing. At last, she gave up pacing and threw herself down on the edge of the bed with a cry of frustration. “Oh, Daff, I’m sorry. I can’t do this. But I must do it. How could I have been so foolish?”

“It isn’t your fault,” Daphne insisted, lowering herself to sit beside her sister. “It’s all his fault for blackmailing you. I’m quite sure that Anna and Theodore could do something about it. He’s a duke, after all, and they’re so terribly rich.”

Which, of course, was why Anna had been so baffled at her younger sister’s inexplicable choice of husband.

“You are one-and-twenty, Emily!” Anna had said, on more than one occasion. “We aren’t poor and vulnerable anymore. You don’t have to marry simply for convenience. And frankly, I do not like your choice of husband. Won’t you reconsider?”

Emily would not reconsider. Daphne, who knew the full story of why her sister would not—and could not—change her mind, stayed silent.

The guilt gnawed at the edges of her mind.

There were a great many things they did not know, not least of all why the infamous Duke of Clapton would be so happy to exchange his silence for a bride, but frankly, Daphne did not care. The man had no right to force her sweet, sensitive sister into a marriage that she did not want.

“You always wanted to marry for love,” Daphne murmured aloud. Emily said nothing, only placing her hand over her sister’s. “Everybody thought that I would be the sentimental, romantic one, desperate to marry for love.”

Emily snorted. “You were, and are, an absolute hellion, Daff. We all thought you’d marry early because you were always ogling men. I think Mama nearly fell over in shock when you announced your intention never to marry.”

“Well, one must admire the scenery, yes?”

Emily chuckled at that, bumping her shoulder against Daphne’s. The twins leaned together, silence falling over them like a comforting blanket. Reflected in the dresser, they looked more different than ever. Emily’s ice-blue dress seemed to drain the color from her face, and her dark hair was hidden under the disheveled veil. Her eyes were like chips of blue ice, whereas Daphne’s were a sharp green.

“I don’t know what I will do,” Emily murmured. “I wish I had been more sensible. Like Anna, you know? Anna was ready to marry a man for convenience, simply to save us and Mama from that awful creditor of Papa’s. She did marry him. I suppose she was lucky that she and Theodore fell in love. I’d like to hope that the Duke and I would fall in love. He’s handsome enough, I suppose, and he’s never been cruel. To me, at least.” She plucked at her voluminous skirts. “He bought me this. It must have cost a fortune.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Daphne snapped. “He blackmailed you. Why can’t he marry some brainless debutante who doesn’t know any better? Why can’t he leave you alone?”

Emily squeezed her eyes shut. “Do you think I haven’t asked myself these questions over and over again? I’d ask him if I wasn’t so afraid of him. It’s no use, Daphne. We aren’t going to get any answers. At least, not until it’s too late.” She breathed out slowly. “It’s already too late.”

Daphne clenched her fists. Abruptly, she leaped up and turned to face her twin.

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“It’s not too late,” she announced. “It’s never too late. I’m not going to let you do this, Emily.”

Emily blinked up at her, baffled. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you won’t be able to bear it, being married to him. I, on the other hand, can handle anything.”

Daphne placed her hands on her hips and tilted up her chin, a little impressed by her own heroism. Of course, it made perfect sense. She would take Emily’s place, and nobody would know the difference. She could manage it.

I can save her.

Daphne’s heroic self-image was neatly shattered when Emily sighed and slumped back on the bed.

“Don’t be silly, Daff.”

“I’m not being silly,” Daphne shot back, piqued. “Look!”

She snatched up Emily’s spectacles, round and wire-rimmed, and shoved them onto her face. The world blurred with the spectacles on, making her eyes sting right away, but that hardly mattered.

Emily propped herself up on her elbows. “What are you trying to prove, Daphne? It’s not that I think you can’t impersonate me. It’s more that you shouldn’t. Why should

you have to marry the Duke?”

Daphne shrugged. “I’d like to be a duchess. Besides, I’m too shocking to make a good match among the ton. Remember how old Lady Silversmith fainted when she saw me riding like a man? And none of the Greens will speak to me after?”

“Enough, Daphne,” Emily interrupted. “I can’t let you do this.”

Daphne crouched down before her sister, taking both of her hands in her own. “And I can’t let you do this. It’ll kill you, marrying a man you don’t love. Look at how you’ve wasted away over the past month. Everybody is concerned. Anna corners me every other day and demands to know what’s going on. Mama cries herself to sleep with worry. It’s not just you who will suffer from this. And how will I ever forgive myself?”

Emily bit her lip, turning away.

Even through those awful, blurry spectacles, Daphne could tell that Emily was fighting back tears.

“I’m so afraid,” she whispered. “I don’t know what to do, Daff.”

“But I do,” Daphne said, firmly. “I can do this.”

“What if you can’t? It’s one thing to talk about this sort of thing here, safe in our room, but what about when it’s real? What about when it’s really happening?”

“He’ll never know the difference,” Daphne assured her. “We must hurry, though. I need to put your dress on, and you’ll have to wear mine.”

“Very well,” Emily said, at last, suddenly decided. “Unlace me, quickly.”

The girls dressed in silence. Emily's wedding gown felt strange on Daphne, even though they'd shared clothes since they were babies. There wasn't much to be done about Daphne's simply dressed hair, but fortunately, the veil hid most of it. As a final touch, she pushed the spectacles onto her nose and turned to face Emily.

"How do I look?" she said.

There was no time to answer, because at that moment, footsteps echoed in the hallway outside, and the girls barely had time to face the door before it flew open.

Octavia Belmont, the Dowager Viscountess St. Maur, stood there. Redoubtable, handsome, and more than a little terrifying. Privately, Daphne thought that Anna was growing more like their mother with each passing day.

Octavia glanced between the two of them, her eyes narrowed. For a moment, Daphne thought that they had succeeded and had fooled even their mother.

But then Octavia heaved a sigh and spoke. "What are you girls playing at? Daphne, why are you wearing your sister's clothes?"

The twins deflated.

Emily glanced at Daphne, her eyes wide and unfocused without her spectacles. Drawing in a breath, Daphne took a step towards her mother.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mama. I am on my way to get married, aren't I?"

Confusion streaked across Octavia's features. "Daphne, what?—"

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“It’s Emily. I am Emily. I am Emily, and we’re late.” Daphne held her mother’s gaze for a long moment. “It’s time to go, Mama.”

Octavia glanced at Emily, then at Daphne, then back to Emily again. She swallowed hard, lifting her chin.

“Sometimes I think I will never understand you girls,” she said, her voice quavering. “I suppose I should give up trying. Well, come along, then. We are going to be late.”

The church was packed. All sorts of fine carriages and horses were lined up outside, and some of the less illustrious guests were forced to stand outside or in the hallway of the church. The chatter and laughter drifted out across the courtyard, to where the bridal carriage was approaching.

I am not afraid, Daphne told herself. I am saving my sister. Am I not the stronger of the two of us? It is my responsibility to keep her safe, and if that means marrying some monstrous duke in her place, then so be it.

Emily had mentioned that the Duke was rather handsome, but Daphne had never found him so. He was cold and unfriendly, and would clearly resort to blackmail. He had never spoken to her, at least.

I’m going to be married. To him. For the rest of my life.

Well, that’s not so bad, is it? You said you would not marry, but really, what woman believes that when she tells it to herself?

The carriage lurched to a halt, and the door was opened. There was a straight, short path between the carriage and the church doors. Daphne could almost feel the prickle of countless eyes on her, judging and assessing.

“You do not have to do this, you know,” Octavia said abruptly, carefully not looking at either one of her children.

Emily was watching Daphne, an odd, pleading look in her eyes.

If I lose my nerve now, Emily will take my place. I will have failed her.

Daphne drew in a breath. “I’m afraid I must, Mama.”

Not giving herself an instant to indulge her cowardice, she climbed out of the carriage and strode into the church.

She remembered a moment too late that ladies, especially brides, were meant to mince around with dainty little steps. Daphne, however, had covered half of the distance between the church doors and the altar in the space of a few seconds.

Murmurs rose all around her, and as expected, she felt the gazes of the congregation like a thousand tiny pinpricks. She imagined that Anna and her husband Theodore were in the audience somewhere, both grim-faced.

Anna had been very open about her feelings regarding Emily’s wedding. Beatrice, their old family friend, would be there too, with her swollen belly and her husband, who by all accounts adored her.

Daphne did not particularly want to see them. An ordinary person would not see the difference between her and Emily, but their close friends might.

Remembering the veil, Daphne hastily pulled it down over her face. The wretched spectacles were unbearable, but Emily never appeared in public without them, so Daphne could not appear without them.

Her husband-to-be was mercifully blurry through the spectacles. She remembered very little about his form and face, except that he had sharp, unblinking green-gray eyes that were more often than not fixed on Emily.

She reached the top of the aisle. For some reason, she found that she was out of breath. Why? She hadn't walked that fast, and the distance was not very far. Why was she struggling to breathe?

With the spectacles in front of her eyes and the veil over that, Daphne had the strangest sensation of being blindfolded, and then gently smothered. Her chest was tight. Had they laced the gown too tight?

She forced herself to breathe in, trying to concentrate on how her lungs inflated.

I am breathing. I am.

Still, the tightness persisted, and she began to feel lightheaded. Her head thumped, and there was a strange echoing in her ears as if she were submerged underwater.

She was aware of Octavia and Emily standing behind her, moving to take their seats. Daphne had a feeling that if she turned and looked at her sister or their mother—or anyone—she would scream aloud and run for her life.

I cannot do this.

Her heartbeat was audible in her ears. Was a person meant to feel their heart thrumming in their chest? No, she thought not. And had the Duke always been so

tall? So imposing?

Daphne hated tall men.

She risked a glance up at him and immediately wished she hadn't. He was staring down at her, and although his expression was blurry, she guessed that it was not a pleasant one.

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“Wait a moment,” he said, interrupting the rector, who was just about to begin his speech. “Let’s throw back that veil.”

“The removal of the veil is generally done after the vows, Your Grace,” the rector said, a trifle nervously.

The Duke did not appear to have heard him, or if he had, he was ignoring him.

“Come, I insist,” he said, still staring down at Daphne.

She clenched her jaw. The feeling of lightheadedness persisted, and she still felt as though she could not breathe. Logic dictated that she was breathing, she must be breathing, but that quiet, calm voice was drowned out by a louder voice screaming in terror.

Saying nothing, Daphne deftly swept back the veil.

Go on, then. Have a good look at me. You can’t tell the difference between me and my sister, I know it.

The crushing feeling in her chest intensified the longer the Duke stared down at her. Daphne did not allow herself to look away, although the spectacles really were starting to hurt her eyes now.

She had the feeling that the entire congregation was holding their breath. Well, perhaps they were. Octavia and Emily certainly were.

I cannot do this.

The thought cut through the chaos of her mind like a hot knife through butter. The tangled ideas and half-baked plans all melted away on either side of this plain, simple truth.

I can't marry this man.

I must. To save Emily.

But who is going to save me?

"I had thought," the Duke said, his voice flat and emotionless, with no inflection either way, "that my bride had blue eyes, not green."

He did not speak loudly. But even so, Daphne was sure that the guests in the first few rows heard. A murmuring broke out, or perhaps that was just the buzzing in her head, the feeling that there was not enough air in the church—and how could there be, with so many people in here?—and that if she wanted to breathe again, she had to leave immediately.

"I think you are mistaken," Daphne heard herself say, her tone matching the Duke's.

He tilted his head to the side, like a bird. "I am never mistaken."

"There is a first time for everything," she shot back.

He narrowed his eyes at her—or so she assumed, with those wretched spectacles that she wished to tear off her face—and her heart sank.

This isn't going to work. He is going to stop the wedding.

On cue, the Duke turned to the rector. “I believe there is a mistake, good sir.”

Daphne reached out, grabbing his sleeve. Gasps rose from the congregation.

“You shall have to make do with me,” she hissed.

The Duke blinked once, slowly, like a cat.

“I do not make do, my dear,” he responded.

Well, that was that, then. She’d failed. Her humiliation was complete. This would be an even bigger story than Anna being jilted by her oldest friend.

I cannot do this. I’ve failed.

She couldn’t breathe. She truly could not breathe this time. Daphne began to gasp, turning to short, sharp breaths in an attempt to draw air into her lungs. The Duke noticed, glancing down at her with a frown. His lips parted—whether to comfort her or to publicly denounce her, Daphne was not sure—but he never got the chance to speak.

Suddenly, there was a hand on her arm, and she turned to see Emily standing beside her. Emily’s eyes—blue, as the Duke had clearly noticed—were desperate and wide.

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As always, Daphne knew exactly what her twin was thinking, and exactly what she needed to do.

The Duke's mouth closed with a snap, his eyes flicking between the twins. Daphne didn't need to see his face to understand the emotions fluttering over his face. Anger, confusion, frustration.

Privately, Daphne thought he was an idiot not to understand. What man could not grasp that blackmailing a woman would not make for a willing bride? Whatever the man's reasons for blackmailing Emily—and they would never be good enough, in Daphne's eyes—he was clearly too stupid to secure a wife in an ordinary way.

Or so Daphne thought. She believed this was a fairly accurate assessment of the man standing beside her at the altar.

“No,” Emily whispered. “This is enough.”

“Emmie...”

“I can't. You can't.”

“I can't breathe, Emily.”

“I know. I know, dearest. But you have to run. Run!”

Daphne dropped her bouquet and ran.

CHAPTER 2

The world shot by in a chaotic gasp. Daphne was aware of strangely disconnected things—the yelps of surprise and outrage from the audience, her mother sobbing, Anna shouting her name at the top of her lungs. She also heard the rector cry out, “Somebody stop that girl!” probably out of shock.

And then, to her bewilderment, she heard the man she had almost married speak up, drowning out the rector.

“Let her go if she wishes.”

And then Daphne was out of the church, and the air was so fresh and clean that she wanted to laugh or cry or sing or do it all at once.

She couldn’t, of course, on account of having her escape to effect first of all.

Skidding to a halt in the courtyard, Daphne glanced this way and that, panting for breath.

I’m not going to have to marry him, she kept thinking, over and over again. I’m free. I’m free.

Emily might not be entirely free, not yet, but one thing is clear—there’ll be no wedding happening today.

I’ve bought us time, at the very least.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, plastering her veil to her face. Suddenly furious, Daphne tore the wretched thing off. It floated to the ground beside her and was immediately absorbed into a large, muddy puddle.

And then she saw what she was looking for—a lone horse, not hitched up to a cart or carriage. It was a plain brown mare, with a well-polished saddle, tied to a railing and left to stand in the rain by a thoughtless owner.

Hiking up her skirts, Daphne hurried towards it. The horse watched her approach with disinterest. It was saddled up and ready to go, and she hauled herself neatly onto its back without the need for a mounting block.

It's been ages since I had a proper horse ride, she thought, swinging her other leg over the saddle. It was not, of course, a lady's saddle. Daphne knew how to ride side-saddle, naturally. Emily always rode side-saddle, very demurely.

Daphne could not stand it. It was uncomfortable, she would feel unbalanced, and she couldn't go nearly as fast as she would like.

Octavia had given up trying to convince her otherwise.

People were beginning to filter out of the church, talking loudly amongst themselves, clearly reeling from what they had just witnessed.

A runaway bride! How exciting. One of them pointed in Daphne's direction. Biting back a curse she'd overheard from one of the grooms and had been dying to use ever since, she kicked her heels against the horse's flanks and they took off.

The horse must have had a good deal of pent-up energy because it shot forward, the scenery flashing past in a blur. The church was left behind in a trice. She tried, and failed, to guide the horse onto the road, but it tugged its head free and plunged into the forest.

Yelping, Daphne bent forward over the horse's neck to avoid being whipped in the face by branches as they shot by. She tore off her spectacles, and the world surged

back into focus. She had meant to hold onto them, to return them to Emily as soon as she could, but the horse suddenly leaped over a fallen tree, and the spectacles flew out of her hands and fell somewhere in the undergrowth. Lost, of course.

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Where are we going?

She began to panic.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but Daphne was sure she could hear the thud of horses' hooves behind her. Was she being pursued?

Ridiculous though it was, Daphne had a sudden, horrifying vision of being dragged bodily back to the church, where the Duke waited for her.

Gritting her teeth, she leaned forward. The horse took this as a hint to gallop faster and increased its speed.

Daphne lost track of time very quickly. They plunged in and out of the forest, sometimes crossing fields and rolling hills. The rain drizzled on for an hour or two, and then abruptly grew heavier, until her hair grew bedraggled over her shoulders and her wet dress began to chafe her skin.

Where am I? Which direction did I ride in?

Now that the initial panic had eased off, the first real twinges of worry began to set in. Daphne reined the horse into a little clearing and glanced around her.

Well, I have no idea where I am. And on the day I leave my compass at home, too!

The compass had been a present from her father many years ago. Daphne had a compass, and Emily had a spyglass. Emily's spyglass was pristine, well-polished, and

displayed atop a selection of astronomy texts in her room.

Daphne's compass was dented, scratched, and generally well-used, with odd quirks like a few grains of sand beneath the glass cover, and she had no idea how they had worked inside. She used it almost daily, taking it out and looking at it even when she knew exactly where she was. It was a stark contrast to Emily's obsessive, vigorous maintenance of her gift, and it nicely highlighted the difference between the twins.

The compass was, if Daphne remembered correctly, in a specially sewn pocket in her bridesmaid dress.

Which, of course, Emily was wearing.

She bit back a sigh.

"Better retrace my steps, then."

By her estimation, it was somewhere in the middle of the afternoon, as the wedding had been scheduled for midday. By now, Daphne was sore, her back and legs aching painfully, and the bones in her corset were digging into her sides. She did not relish the prospect of a painful, wet ride back, but really, there was nothing for it.

She steered the horse towards home.

Abruptly, a crack of lightning split the sky, the iron-grey clouds looming darker than ever. A roll of thunder followed straight after, loud and close enough to rattle her teeth.

The horse screamed, flinging itself onto its hind legs. Daphne yelped, grabbing for the bridle, but the leather was slippery, and her hands were numb and wet. She lost her grip, tumbling backward out of the saddle just as the horse lurched forward.

Thump.

She hit the ground hard enough to knock the breath from her body. The horse galloped away, its ears pressed back against its head, and disappeared into the forest.

Daphne lay there for a moment, spreadeagled on her back. The squelchy, muddy ground beneath her was soaking her dress, and rainwater pelted down on her from above.

I think it would be best all around if I were just struck by lightning. Right now. Boom.

She lay there for a few minutes more. Lightning jolted down a second time, but this time the thunder took a count of five seconds to come. The storm was moving away.

It seemed she was not going to be struck by lightning right away.

Daphne heaved herself into a sitting position, not daring to look at her once-ice-blue gown. It was, of course, soaked with mud, torn in several places, and essentially good for nothing but rags.

She put her hands on her hips and whistled for the horse. Belatedly, she remembered that it was not her precious Gulliver she had been riding, but a strange horse, one that probably did not come when it was whistled at.

Well, now what?

Retracing her steps was out of the question, of course. A ride of several hours, while uncomfortable before, was now clearly impossible. Glancing around, Daphne saw nothing but more trees. No paths, no roads, no dwellings.

Just before despair set in, however, she spotted something else. A fence, well-built, sturdy, and fairly modern, weaving through the trees.

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A fence means farms and fields, which likely means houses. And, of course, roads. Perhaps I might find a stagecoach to take me back to town.

She had no money for a stagecoach, of course, but it was better not to think of that. She would cross that bridge when she came to it.

With her first step forward, Daphne noticed to her chagrin that she had somehow twisted her ankle in her fall, in addition to the many new bruises and cuts she had acquired. It was not broken, or even badly sprained, which was fortunate, but now every second step hurt.

Just a little further, she told herself, even though she had no idea whether it was much further or not, or even where she was going.

Climbing the fence was a tricky business. There was an ominous tearing sound from her skirts, but she ignored it.

She trudged onwards, hoping to come across some cozy little farm cottage. After only a few minutes, she spotted a little folly peering out of a clearing. Brightening, she hurried towards it.

I'll be out of the rain, at least.

The folly was made in the Grecian style, circular, with a few artfully weathered pillars and a domed roof, half-covered in moss. She stepped out of the rain with a sigh of relief and set out wringing out her hair and skirts.

In the silence that followed, Daphne distinctly heard a long, miserable sniff. She froze.

“Ahem!”

There was no answer to her questioning cough.

She peered around a pillar. “Is anybody there? Show yourself!”

There was a shuffling sound and another half-smothered sniff.

Daphne inched forward, peering around the next pillar.

“I warn you,” she said, hoping to sound confident and unafraid, “my sister and I often engaged in fisticuffs, before she decided it was not ladylike. I was rather good at it!”

A small figure appeared from behind the pillar in front of her, making her jump. It was a young boy of about eight or nine, his face blotchy and red. He sniffed disdainfully.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” he demanded. “Telling me that you used to play fisticuffs with your sister?”

Daphne put her hands on her hips. “It was all I could come up with on such short notice.”

“Well, you might want to think up something better next time. If I were a robber or a murderer, I would have split my sides laughing at that.”

She snorted. “I’ll bear that in mind. And who are you, if you don’t mind my asking? And what are you doing here, all by yourself, in the rain?”

The boy dragged a long, pointed glance over her bedraggled frame, lingering on the pool of water growing around her feet. She tried unsuccessfully to pull her wet hair up from her neck.

“I was caught in the storm,” she said, a trifle defensively.

The boy sniffed. “My name is Alex. I came out here because I like it here, and I wanted to be by myself.”

“Why were you crying?”

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “I was not crying.”

Daphne decided not to push the issue. “Well, my name is Daphne. I have a niece only a few years younger than you, and it would upset me very much if I saw her all by herself in such weather, and in such distress.”

“I’m not in distress,” Alex muttered, somewhat half-heartedly.

“I see.”

Daphne eyed the boy closely. He was dressed well, his clothes only a little damp, and had black curls all over his head and large deep blue eyes. He was the sort of sweet-looking, little boy that artists liked to depict as cherubs and small angels, or rosy-cheeked, angelic children of indeterminate gender.

At least, they would have, were he not in the middle of crying his eyes out, with snot running liberally down his face. Daphne wished she had a handkerchief to offer him. He dragged his sleeve across his nose, and she winced.

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He glowered at her. "I lost my handkerchief."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't tut and sigh. Tell me what is wrong, and I'll talk to you frankly about it."

Alex eyed her suspiciously. "Like a grownup?"

Daphne inclined her head. "Like a grownup."

He sniffed. "Very well. If you must know, it is my father. I am the greatest disappointment in his life, and he takes no trouble to hide it."

Daphne flinched. "I'm sure that can't be true."

"I'm sure you don't know my father. He hates me."

She bit her lip, trying to think of something to say.

Alex moved over to the back of the stone structure and sat down on the ground, his back against the wall. Drawing his knees up to his chest, he wrapped his arms around them and perched his chin on top. Suddenly, he looked simultaneously much older and much younger than his eight years.

She sighed and moved over to sit beside him.

"My father made a great many mistakes in his life," she said, after a pause. "He did things he should not have done. He hurt me and my sisters, and my mother, too. He

was only human, and humans do make mistakes, whether they want to or not. But despite it all, he loved us. He loved us so much, and we loved him.”

Alex stuck out his lip petulantly. “Well, that’s all very well for you, but my father is different.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. He’s cruel.”

Daphne flinched a little at that word. “Cruel?” she repeated carefully. “What do you mean by that?”

She glanced over his small frame, looking for bruises or scrapes, signs that he was underfed or abused in some way.

Alex caught her eye and sighed theatrically. “He doesn’t hurt me if that’s what you mean. At least, he doesn’t hit me, or cane me, or anything like that. He’s never done that.”

Daphne relaxed a little. “Well, I’m glad to hear that. But then what do you mean bycruel?”

Alex shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s too much to explain. But let me assure you that I quite hate him, and he hates me.”

Daphne nibbled on her lip, trying to come up with something clever to say. It was no good assuring Alex that his father really did love him when she didn’t know the man in question. He might be a monster, cold and heartless like so many of the ton.

Daphne personally knew many gentlemen who truly believed that their children had

nothing to do with them, and never bothered themselves with parenting in any way, leaving it entirely to the ladies. And sometimes the ladies did not bother, either.

And then, of course, when their children grew up wild and cold, they had the audacity to be baffled and wonder what they had done to deserve it.

No, she had better keep her mouth shut until she understood the situation.

Not that I will be staying here long enough to understand the situation, she reminded herself.

“Well, I’m sorry for it,” she said, at last. “Families can be tricky.”

Alex snorted. “You can say that again. And then there’s Grandmama, always poking her nose in and telling tales. She seems to have a knack for making everything worse.”

“My sister is a little like that,” Daphne agreed. “My older sister, that is. She’s married and has children, and rather believes that she knows everything. It’s irritating that she is so frequently right.”

Alex nodded in agreement.

They sat there in silence for a few more minutes, until the rain appeared to ease off a little more.

“I suppose I should go home,” Alex muttered. “They’ll all be out, looking for me.”

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“Is your home nearby?”

“Yes, fairly close.”

“Well then.” Daphne got to her feet, brushed off her damp palms, and extended one hand towards the boy. “I shall take you home, to make sure you get home safe.”

Alex flushed. “You don’t have to do that. I’m not a baby.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I hoped to ask for a favor in return. Would your family mind if I stayed the night? As you can see, I’m rather wet and very far from home myself. Could I trespass on your hospitality? You seem like a proper gentleman, and I am sure that I can trust you.”

Alex brightened at that, taking her hand and getting to his feet.

“I think they wouldn’t mind you staying. We have plenty of space. Oh, and by the way, I ought to let you know that I am not blind, and despite all the dirt, it’s pretty clear that you’re a bride.”

Daphne reddened. “Yes, I know I look quite a sight. I’m hoping your kind family will offer a change of clothes.”

“I’m sure they will. But don’t worry, I am not going to ask any questions about your wedding day, as Papa always told me that it’s impolite to ask uncomfortable questions.”

“A wise man,” Daphne agreed.

She shook out her skirts—damp and filthy—and together they picked their way down the hill, sticking to the tree line.

The path was difficult, the ground slippery and steep. Daphne was so absorbed in watching where to put her feet that she did not look where she was going. More accurately, she did not look at what was happening at the bottom of the hill.

“They’re looking for me,” Alex whispered.

She glanced up, and her gaze sharpened.

At the bottom of the slope, alongside the house they were approaching, a dozen or so people were milling around in the gardens, torches and candles glimmering in the gloom.

At her side, Alex sucked in a sharp breath. “There’s Papa! He’s come to look for me!”

Daphne saw at once who Alex was talking about. A tall, stocky man was striding up the hill towards them, holding up a lantern. The buttery yellow light flickered across his face, revealing a square, sharp jaw and a grim expression. He was a powerfully built man, as far as Daphne could tell, making even Emily’s duke seem a little weak. He had a strong profile and heavy, dark eyebrows hanging over his eyes.

He did not seem happy in the slightest.

He had certainly spotted them, too.

Alex released Daphne’s hand and began hurrying towards the man.

“Papa, Papa!” he called. “Here, Papa!”

CHAPTER 3

“Don’t tell me where he isn’t!” Edward thundered, slamming his fists on his desk. “Tell me where he is!”

The governess, Mrs. Trench, was a woman of middle years, perhaps several years short of forty. She was rather stocky and wide about the waist, with a pleasant round face and prematurely graying brown hair knotted back in a simple bun. Nothing ever seemed to rattle her or upset her, least of all Edward’s outbursts. She barely even blinked.

“He opened the schoolroom window and climbed out,” she responded smoothly. “I was downstairs, fetching the tea tray, as usual, so I daresay he had been gone at least ten minutes by the time I returned. I could not possibly say where he had gone, only that he was not in the house. The servants and I have searched thoroughly. We ought to expand our search to the grounds, Your Grace.”

Edward threw himself back into his seat, rubbing his hand over his face. He was too tired for this. Why couldn’t Alex stay out of trouble just for a while? Why must everything be so difficult?

At least his neighbors—who were thankfully few and had gotten the hint that he did not like unexpected guests, or any guests at all, and would not send him invitations—had finally stopped telling him that Alex’s problems would cease if he could only have a mother.

“I’ll round up some of the gardeners and groundsmen to search for him,” offered Peter, the third occupant of the room.

Peter Tinn was around thirty-five years of age, tall and rather too slim, with a head full of duckling-fluff hair and a surprisingly strong and full brown beard. He was an excellent steward, with a tendency towards timidity.

Frankly, Edward was not sure how he hadn't managed to drive off his oldest—and only—friend.

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Was it pathetic for a gentleman to admit that his closest friend was his steward? Probably.

“Mrs. Trench can do that, Peter,” Edward answered. “I want a word with you.”

Mrs. Trench inclined her head and left the room silently, closing the door after her. Peter turned to watch her go.

“It’s not Jemimah’s fault,” he said, as soon as the door closed. “Master Alexander was in a strange mood all day, and she only turned her back for a handful of minutes, and?—”

“Yes, Peter, I know. I don’t blame Mrs. Trench. I’m fairly sure you shouldn’t call her Jemimah, by the way.”

Peter reddened. “She did say that I could, Your Grace.”

“Did she? Fine, not my business. But really, I’m at my wits’ end with Alex, Pete. Nothing I do works. He hates me.”

Peter bit his lip. “You’re too hard on yourself, Your Grace. And on him, perhaps.”

Edward sighed, raking a hand through his hair. It was a little too long for fashionable society—not that he cared about fashionable society—and lately, he had started discovering the occasional strand of silver hair amongst the black.

I am not doing a good job of keeping my promise.

As always, that thought—the daily reminder of how deeply he had failed Jane—dropped him into a stark black mood.

“I’ll join the search outside,” Edward said, leaping to his feet so suddenly that he made poor Peter jump. “I would like you to make arrangements to have the schoolroom moved to one of the higher floors. I won’t have my son jumping out in the middle of his lessons. Once he goes to Eton, he won’t be able to pull that nonsense.”

“Yes, Your Grace. Where are you going to search?”

“I don’t know,” Edward muttered.

“Should I inform the Dowager Duchess?”

“No!” Edward answered, a little too quickly.

Peter blinked, not entirely surprised.

Edward sighed, glancing away. “There is no sense in bothering my stepmother. She’s retired to the dower house for the night. I don’t want her disturbed. This is not her concern.”

Peter scratched his temple. “Are you sure that she will see it that way, Your Grace?”

Edward didn’t bother to reply. He picked up a waxed jacket from his coat hook by the door, pulled it on, and hurried out into the dark hallways.

The country house was very old, of course, and decorated in a style several decades out of fashion. Occasionally, his stepmother would make noises about changing some things, but he never seemed to get around to it. Edward couldn’t quite say what had

kept him from making the house look more like his own, but it probably had something to do with his father's mocking, amused voice in the back of his head.

"You can't possibly think that all of this is yours, can you, Edward?"

The wave of cold air when he stepped outside washed away the thoughts, jerking him out of his reverie. It was late afternoon, and darkness was already crowding in, filling the garden with gloom and shadows. As it often did, the mist had rolled in from the fields, a greenish-white carpet creeping through the grounds. He could see distant, bobbing lanterns and a few candles carried by various servants combing the gardens. They were all calling for Alex, all sounding faintly concerned.

Alex was popular with the servants. He was a precocious boy, according to Mrs. Trench, with a thirst for knowledge and a maturity beyond his years.

Perhaps if the boy were less mature, less sensitive, he wouldn't take to running off every time his father spoke sharply to him.

My father said things a thousand times worse to me. And I never ran off. I wouldn't have dared.

On second thought, perhaps moving the schoolroom up a few floors was a bad idea. It might simply add a few layers of danger to Alex's future escapes.

Sighing, Edward snatched up a lantern and strode around the side of the house, towards the hills and distant treeline. Alex often liked to take walks up there—accompanied by his trusty governess, of course. He had stopped asking Edward to walk with him.

That should have been good news—Edward was always too busy to come, anyway—but for some reason, not being asked sent a pang through his chest.

I'm trying, Jane.

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Now, where was that part of the grounds that Alex raved about? Some ugly, little building that had been there for decades, one that he kept sketching. Sketching!

That was something Edward was never permitted to do. Gentlemen, his father had said more than once, enjoyed hunting, cards, whiskey, and not much else. Learning to dance was a necessary evil, but never to be enjoyed or practiced more than absolutely necessary. Art, painting, and music were out of the question, as was reading novels.

Edward wondered what his father would think of his grandson, who was already proficient with watercolors, loved to dance, and was learning the pianoforte. He would be ashamed, of course.

Am I ashamed?

Edward prayed and prayed that the answer would be no.

The ground sloped sharply up towards the folly, silhouetted high on the hill and half-buried in trees. After the heavy rain they'd had that day, the ground was slippery and muddy. Edward lost his footing more than once.

Not for the first time, he felt a prickle of fear.

Where has Alex gone? He's never been gone for so long before. He could have slid down somewhere and broken his neck. He could have gotten lost. With the rain, the rivers would have swelled. If he got swept away...

Edward cut off that thought, panic swelling inside him. He imagined fishing Alex's

bloated, unblinking corpse out of the river in a week, looking down at his only son and knowing that everything was his fault. Knowing that his son was dead and nothing would bring him back. No chance to apologize. No hopes of ever seeing eye to eye in the future.

Edward cupped a hand around his mouth and bellowed into the growing gloom.

“Alexander! Alex! Where are you?”

A rustling came from further up the hill. He squinted, shading his eyes.

“Here, Papa!”

Edward nearly dropped the lantern. He ran up the slope, losing his footing and finding it necessary to slap a hand on the ground to steady himself.

When he was about halfway up, he saw them.

Them being his son, hand in hand with a strange, almost ghostly woman. They were picking their way down the hill, which was steep and slippery enough to make for very hard going.

Alex beamed, releasing the woman’s hand and stumbling across the hill towards his father.

Edward could have wept. He didn’t, of course, because gentlemen did not do that, either. Instead, he set the lantern firmly down on a nearby rock and grabbed Alex’s shoulders with both hands.

“What were you thinking of?” he snapped. “The entire household is out looking for you! Have you any idea of the worry you have put us all through?”

The smile faded from Alex's face. He jerked his shoulders out of his father's grip.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I should have left a note for Mrs. Trench."

"You should not have snuck out at all. Come, we must return at once." Edward straightened up, picking up the lantern again, and extended his hand towards his son.

Alex didn't take it. Instead, he turned and looked at the woman.

"What about my new friend, Papa?"

Edward looked properly at the woman for the first time. She was not, upon closer inspection, a ghost. She was younger than he'd imagined, twenty-one or twenty-two, and was in quite a shocking state. Her hair hung loose and was wet and matted. Her ice-blue gown was so filthy that he could barely tell that it was blue at all. The skirt was torn in several places, and she appeared to have lain on her back in the mud for some time, judging by the back of her dress.

But even the grime and untidiness did not quite hide how pretty she was. She had a smooth, pale, oval face, with strong eyebrows, thick dark hair, and a pair of very large, vivid green eyes. A rare color, in fact. She was looking at him with an intense, unwavering expression.

"Your friend?" he echoed. "I think not."

He turned to walk away, but Alex tugged at his sleeve. "Papa, I told her she should stay the night."

Edward blinked down at his son. "I beg your pardon?"

Alex flushed. "She's gotten lost, and she's very wet and cold. She was kind to me and

said she would walk me home. I said she could stay with us.”

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“She offered to walk you home because she wanted a bed for the night, you little fool. She didn’t offer out of the kindness of her heart. Now, come along. We?—”

“He’s not a fool,” the woman interrupted. He was a little surprised to hear a clear, genteel accent come out of her mouth, the sort that was produced by expensive finishing schools. “You shouldn’t talk to your son that way.”

“What business is it of yours how I talk to my son?” Edward shot back. “What business do you have in laying your hands on him?”

“Laying my hands on... Oh, you are ridiculous! I came across a sad boy all alone, and then I took him back to his family. He’s a fine, clever boy, and very kind indeed. I can only assume he takes after his mother.”

That hurt. Edward flinched back, rocking on his heels, but regained his composure quickly. Alex said nothing.

“Yes, well, that’s really no concern of yours. Good day.” He turned to go, snatching Alex’s hand, but the woman spoke again.

“You can’t talk to me like that,” she snapped, stomping around to face him. “I’m a lady.”

He stared down at her. She certainly spoke like a lady, but what lady would wander the countryside alone, in such a state? She barely came up to his shoulders, but that did nothing to dampen the absolute ferocity in her gaze as she glared up at him, muddy hands on her muddy hips.

“You don’t look like a lady,” he heard himself say.

She barked out a mirthless laugh. “Oh, that’s how it is, eh? We’re going by looks alone? Well, in that case, you are certainly not a gentleman, judging by the way you have treated me. I don’t think I’ve ever met a ruder man.”

“Well then, you haven’t met many men at all, have you?” he snarled.

He made to step around her and head down the hill, but she neatly side-stepped and blocked his path once again.

“Your poor son was crying his heart out over the way you had treated him,” she said, jabbing a finger towards his chest.

She didn’t touch him, but Edward felt his irritation soar as if she had.

“That is between my son and me. You have no business intervening.”

“That is exactly the kind of attitude that ought to be left in the past. Modern men and women do not accept it. I read all sorts of progressive journals, you know,” the woman added, tilting up her chin.

Edward was suddenly aware of a headache throbbing behind his eyes. It didn’t help that he was suddenly remembering Jane’s collection of tomes on the subjects of morality, philosophy, and other various learned essays that he’d never bothered to read before she died.

He had kept the books and essays, of course. Some of them were quite thought-provoking, in fact.

“If you are a lady, then you had better get yourself home,” Edward said at last, the

heat gone out of his voice.

He was just tired now and wanted to get back home and talk things over with Alex. If Alex would talk to him, of course.

“It’s dark, and the rain is only going to get worse. You already look a state, but I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you that.”

He stepped around her again, and once again, she blocked his path.

“Look,” Edward said, the anger coming back. “I am going to push you down this hill if you don’t get out of my way.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No, I don’t think you will.”

His shoulders sagged.

It was true. He had no intention of assaulting any woman, even one that was clearly mad, but he’d hoped that the threat alone would work.

“What do you want?” he managed, at last.

“What is your name, Sir?”

He hadn’t expected that.

Edward cleared his throat. “It is not Sir. It is Your Grace.”

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She raised her eyebrows, unimpressed. “You’re a duke, then. The Duke of where?”

“Here,” he responded shortly.

Daphne fought not to roll her eyes. “And where is here, exactly?”

He pressed his lips together. “Thornbridge.”

She flinched back a little. The name was familiar. “You are the Duke of Thornbridge?”

“I am,” he confirmed. “And this errant, little wretch is my only son, so you’ll forgive me if I let my worry for him overwhelm my manners. As I said earlier, you ought to get home and out of those wet things.”

A sudden and rather vivid image of him peeling her out of those wet things flashed through his mind, much to his horror. He gave himself a little shake—it was just because she was young and pretty, and he’d been alone for far too long—and made to move past her.

He had actually succeeded in getting past her, towing Alex along behind him, when she spoke again.

“Your Grace, wait!”

CHAPTER 4

Daphne had been told, by several different people in many different ways, that she had a habit of talking too much. This brought with it many other problems. For example, she often found herself in the middle of a sentence without knowing how she got there or how she intended to finish it.

Generally, this led to embarrassing conversations, which she cringed over or laughed over with her sister.

On this occasion, however, her big mouth might have much more serious consequences.

For example, she was cold, wet, alone in an unfamiliar part of the countryside with no way of getting home, and she had just been extremely rude to the only person who could possibly help her.

The Duke of Thornbridge. That name is familiar, but I can't think where I might have heard it. He certainly hasn't been out in Society these past few years. I would have remembered him otherwise.

He was a tall man, and while Daphne generally hated men who loomed over her, she had to admit that the Duke's form was impressive. He had broad shoulders and a muscular chest, the sort of figure that Society dandies padded their suits to achieve. It never quite looked right on them, not like it did on the Duke of Thornbridge.

His black hair was damp due to the mizzling rain, curling ever so slightly and grazing his jaw. He had a dusting of stubble on his cheeks, too—the beginnings of a beard.

Now, that was careless. The fashion for gentlemen was to be clean-shaven, or else to sport carefully curated mustachios. This man seemed not to care whether he shaved or not.

Then again, he also seemed to spurn fashion, judging by his clothes. When he turned his back, Daphne noticed that his coat was tight around his shoulders. Not because it was a fashionable cut, but because of the powerful muscles in his back.

She cleared her throat. He wasn't bad-looking exactly, but certainly not handsome enough for her. And yet she found herself getting ready to speak. Of course.

The words were out of her mouth, as usual, before she could stop them. "Your Grace, wait!"

He paused, and for a moment, she thought he was going to ignore her and stamp away. Then he heaved a sigh and bent down to speak to Alex.

"Go ahead of me. Mrs. Trench is waiting for you—I can see her on the patio down there. Join her immediately. Do you hear?"

Alex bit his lip, looking mutinous. "But the lady?—"

"Alex, I do not want to have to tell you again."

Alex met Daphne's eyes, and she raised her eyebrows helplessly.

He sighed. "Yes, Papa."

Shooting Daphne an apologetic glance, Alex turned and ran down the hill. As he entered the more brightly lit patio area at the foot of the hill, where the field bordered the grounds of the house, a number of servants came forward. They all seemed pleased to see him, smiling at him and patting his head.

Mrs. Trench, as she'd been pointed out, was a stern-looking woman with a stocky frame, but her face relaxed into a smile when she saw Alex. She offered him her

hand, and he took it. They turned to go inside, and then Daphne was alone with this man. With the Duke of Thornbridge.

The penny dropped.

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“I know where I heard your name before,” Daphne murmured. “You’re a recluse. I heard your name mentioned in town, and people say that you shut yourself away. They say that you’re odd.”

The Duke’s mouth tightened. “Did you call me back to insult me, Madam?”

Daphne flushed, to her chagrin. “I am sorry. I... I often speak without thinking.”

He grunted. It wasn’t an acceptance of her apology, but neither did he stamp away.

“The thing is, I am a lady, and I need your help. I... I’m lost, and I’m soaked and covered in mud, as you can see. I haven’t had a lot of luck today,” she added, and he snorted. No reply seemed to be forthcoming, and so Daphne continued. “I was hoping to find a house or something like that—somewhere I could get help. Could you... ahem. Could you help me?”

“You say you’re a lady. Who are you, exactly?”

“My name is Daphne Belmont. My father was the late Viscount St. Maur. Perhaps you’ve heard the name?”

He grunted again. “I have. And what help do you want from me?”

“Well, I came from London, and?—”

“London? You’re hours from home. What do you want, then? Come along, it’s late. Want me to send you home in my carriage?”

“N-No, I can’t go back in this state, or at this hour. I was hoping...”

She swallowed hard, studying his face. He had strong features, not entirely fashionable. No button-nose or pink lips on this face. He had dark eyebrows hanging low over his eyes. She couldn’t make out the color and was briefly horrified that she had wanted to make out the color.

Really, a gentleman would have offered to let me stay by now, and not let me stutter and stammer my way through an awkward situation.

The fact was that he was not going to offer, so Daphne was going to have to go ahead and say it.

“I was hoping you’d let me stay the night,” she said in a rush. “And... and maybe give me some fresh clothes.”

He stared down at her for a long moment. Why was his face so difficult to read? Daphne did not consider herself a connoisseur of human expressions, but she liked to think she could work out what the average person was thinking in most situations.

This man, however... Well, it was like trying to read a blank slate.

He heaved a sigh. “No,” he said shortly.

Daphne was flabbergasted. “I... You...” she stammered ineffectually.

The Duke turned on his heel and began to walk away from her without another word.

Daphne scrambled after him. “Wait! Wait a minute! You can’t say no... Well, that is, you can say no, and you have, but please reconsider! What am I to do?”

“I’m not sure that is my concern, Miss... Belmont, was it?”

He didn’t slow his pace, and Daphne was forced to slip and slide down the slope beside him, her arms occasionally windmilling to keep her balance.

“Surely one night can’t hurt? I shan’t get in your way. You won’t even know I’m here.”

“Even if that were true, which I doubt,” he added, shooting her a sidelong glance, “you forget about propriety, Miss Belmont. I am a widower living here without any ladies in the house. You couldn’t possibly spend the night under my roof. You’d be ruined. So would I, for that matter.”

Daphne cursed herself. She had forgotten about all those ridiculous rules.

“How about,” she said, beginning to run out of breath, “if I just promise not to try and seduce you?”

He stopped dead, and she nearly skidded down and into his broad back.

“I am not the sort of man who is seduced, Miss Belmont,” he said, his voice low and dangerous.

She held up her hands in surrender. “I just promised that I wouldn’t even try, Your Grace.”

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He stared at her for a long, tense minute, then rolled his eyes.

“I can’t help noticing, Miss Belmont, that under those layers of mud, you’re wearing what appears to be a wedding dress.”

She winced. “You’re very sharp, Your Grace. Astonishingly so.”

He shot her another sideways glance. “I cannot decide whether you’re mocking me or flattering me.”

“Which would make you more likely to let me stay the night?”

“I don’t know what happened to your husband-to-be,” he continued, ignoring her question, “but I can’t help but feel that he had a lucky escape.”

Daphne bit her lip. “Let’s just say that both of us had a lucky escape and leave it at that. Look, Your Grace, I’m sure women have tried to catch you before with all sorts of tricks. I’ve been in Society—I’ve seen it. But believe me when I say that I am not trying to catch you. Really, I am not. I just... just nearly married somebody, and it terrified me. I could scarcely breathe at the altar. I shan’t bore you with the details, since I imagine you’ll read about it all in the gossip columns tomorrow. But, truly, if I was coming to ruin you, would I come to you looking like this?”

She held her arms out to either side so that the full horror of her filthy, ragged self could be appreciated. Daphne had not looked in a mirror lately, but she thought that was probably just as well. No doubt she looked like a raving madwoman, dragged through several hedges and a pond, then left out in the rain for a week or two.

The Duke's gaze traveled over her frame from head to foot. Daphne's skin seemed to prickle as he looked her over—a curious and unfamiliar sensation. She wasn't sure whether she liked it or not. It was, however, notably different from the pin-prick sensation she'd felt at the church when everyone was staring at her.

At last, he let out a long, exhausted sigh.

“You'll catch your death out here tonight. The woods get deathly cold, even at this time of year. And then I would be blamed for your death, and that would be tiresome. You had better stay.”

Daphne's knees nearly buckled with relief. “Oh, thank?—”

“Save your thanks. I am not doing it as a favor to you, but because I am a gentleman, regardless of what you have to say about it.”

Daphne flushed. “Perhaps I was a little ungracious.”

He grunted. “Follow me.”

Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel and began to stride down the hill, faster than ever. She was forced to almost run to keep up.

Down on the terrace below, most of the servants had gone in, except for a handful.

“You won't be staying under my roof without a proper female presence,” the Duke said, without turning around. “My stepmother will stay the night. I expect you to be gone before breakfast.”

“B-Before breakfast? Could I not have a little...?”

He sighed heavily. "After breakfast, then. But directly after! I don't wish to see you."

"Understood."

They reached the patio. A tall, thin man with a mop of whitish hair stood there, his eyes nearly popping out of his head at the sight of Daphne.

"Your... Grace?" he ventured timidly. "Who...?"

"This is Miss Belmont, she'll be staying the night," the Duke rapped out. "Send word immediately to the Dowager Duchess that she must stay the night, too. I shall explain everything once she gets here, but let her know that it's of the utmost urgency. Put Miss Belmont in one of the bedrooms, as far away from my wing as possible. She'll require food, tea, a bath, and some fresh clothes."

"Very good, Your Grace." The man bowed, eyeing Daphne out of the corner of his eye, then turned and scuttled inside.

For a moment, Daphne dithered on the doorstep, until the Duke shot her an annoyed look.

"Well, don't dawdle, Miss Belmont! Go with him!"

She gave a most undignified squeak and scurried after the steward.

Edward's headache was pounding merrily behind his eyes when a knock sounded at his study door.

"Enter."

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It was the Dowager Duchess, of course, as composed and tidy as if being urgently summoned in the evening in this manner was simply a matter of course. Lady Clarissa Beaton, the Dowager Duchess of Thornbridge, was not the sort of woman who allowed herself to get ruffled over anything.

She was a tall woman, well-built and handsome for her age, with graying hair that had once been blonde and amber eyes. When she was first widowed, Society gossiped over whether she intended to remarry or not. Apparently, the role of Dowager Duchess of Thornbridge was a finer position than any man could offer her.

Edward was grateful for her help over the years. It had occurred to him more than once that he ought to show it more.

“I have heard a rather shocking story from your steward,” Clarissa said, her voice cool and even. “Is there a madwoman in your attic, Edward?”

He grunted. “Not exactly. Miss Belmont, to be precise. I’m not familiar with the name, but I know the St. Maurs.”

Clarissa pursed her lips, no doubt consulting her encyclopedic knowledge of the ton and their families.

“Which Miss Belmont? The eldest Miss Belmont made a most remarkable match and married the Duke of Langdon. There was quite a scandal about her at the time. The family is said to be on the up and up. There are two Miss Belmonts left. Twins, I believe. Which one is it?”

“Daphne. I can’t imagine it makes much difference.”

Clarissa settled herself in a chair by the fire. “No, it does not. And she is here?”

“In quite a state, yes. Wearing a wedding dress.”

She stiffened. “My, how intriguing. Would you like me to get the story out of her?”

“No, better not. It’s none of our concern, after all.”

Clarissa pursed her lips in obvious disagreement. “She is under our roof, Edward.”

After a tense pause, she cleared her throat and corrected herself.

“Your roof, that is.”

Edward sighed, raking a hand through his hair again. It was still damp from the rain. Outside, he could see that mist was swirling thickly through the gardens, reminding him of nothing so much as the tide coming in. This time of year was always damp and dank, with endless mud and rain and cold. It was enough to make anyone melancholy.

Sometimes I remember why I used to like spending part of the year in London.

No, he didn’t mean that. Did he? London was noisy, crowded, and smelly. It was full of people whom one did not wish to talk to, but who talked incessantly anyway.

“I brought a gown and some other linens for the girl,” Clarissa said, interrupting his thoughts. “Just one gown, just one change. We don’t want to encourage her to stay longer.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll have my carriage ready to take her directly home, straight after breakfast. We don’t even need to see her.”

Clarissa pursed her lips. “After breakfast? You are entirely too kind, Edward.”

He smiled tightly. “I don’t think you believe that.”

There was a brief pause after that.

Edward had never quite known how to speak to his stepmother. Really, she was the only mother he’d known. She’d tried hard to mother him but never had seemed cut out for it. Not her fault, naturally.

Of course, now that the late Duke was gone, Clarissa was somewhat cut adrift. The bulk of the money and all of the land went to the heir, and Clarissa’s widow’s jointure was not as generous as she’d been led to believe. They’d both suffered from the late Duke’s choices, it seemed.

Edward did not worry too much about right and wrong in his daily life, not like those endless philosophical tomes his late wife used to enjoy. But he did know his duty, and it was not fair that Clarissa should be plunged into poverty. He supplemented her mean jointure with an allowance of his own and gifted her the dower house and the land it stood upon. Besides, it was pleasant to have Clarissa so close. He had no other family left, anyway.

Except for his son, of course, but that relationship was prickly at the best of times.

Edward got up from his seat and moved over to the window. He wished Clarissa would leave. It had been a long day, and his mind was reeling.

I’m the one who summoned her to my house after dark. I can hardly send her away

now.

“Let’s not worry too much about that conniving girl,” Clarissa said suddenly, rising and crossing the room to stand behind him. He could see her reflection in the window, pale as a ghost. “I am more concerned about Alex. He is our future, after all, and I do think he is running wild.”

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“I think my son can hardly be described as wild. He sketches and plays the pianoforte, and likes to read poetry.”

Clarissa's lips tightened. She wisely kept her opinions to herself, however.

“Well, whatever you like,” she said, flashing him an insincere smile. She reached up and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I would be more than happy to take a more active role in his education and care if you prefer. I do have a good deal of time on my hands these days.”

Edward shot her a sideways glance. “No, thank you. I have it in hand.”

Clarissa's expression was skeptical. “It's your choice, of course.”

Her hand slipped off his shoulder, but she continued to stand behind him.

Edward cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Was there anything else, Clarissa? It's just that... well, it's late, and I do have work to finish before bed, and...”

“Of course,” Clarissa said, taking a step back. She smiled benevolently at him. “I take it that my usual room is prepared?”

“Of course. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Edward.”

She slipped out of the room, leaving him alone.

He sighed, leaning forward and resting his forehead against the cool glass.

She told me not to think of the ‘conniving girl’. By that, I suppose she means Miss Belmont.

But I cannot stop thinking about her.

What is wrong with me?

CHAPTER 5

Daphne nearly cried when she sank into the hot bath, at long last.

The room she was shown into was bigger than any of their spare bedrooms back home, and it had a washroom attached to it. When she emerged, cloaked in steam, from the bath after a good, long while, she found that a fresh, clean gown was laid out for her, along with some underthings and a shawl. Her bridal shoes, entirely wrecked, were gone, and a pair of neat, feminine boots waited for her instead. A folded nightdress waited on the pillow of the huge, four-poster bed.

Oh, and there was a robe too, made of the softest silk. Daphne wrapped herself up in it, beaming so wide that her cheeks hurt.

At least I’m safe. I’ll stay here tonight, eat a large breakfast, and then go home in the morning. The Duke will be glad to be rid of me, and the feeling is certainly mutual.

Perhaps if she kept telling herself that, it would become true. Daphne was uneasily aware of a strange sort of tug in her gut whenever she thought too hard about the Duke, about his serious, sharp face or his remarkably broad shoulders.

I can admire a handsome man as dispassionately as if I were looking at a pretty bird.

This was not entirely true. When Daphne thought of the Duke, she could not honestly say that it was ornithology on her mind. She had admired men before, finding them good-looking.

Society was full of good-looking men. She wasn't entirely sure what was so different about this occasion. Or this man, specifically. Nobody else had conjured up that odd, little ache in the pit of her stomach. It wasn't unpleasant, exactly, but it certainly was distracting. It was not convenient to be attracted to him.

The sooner I get home, the better, I think.

A knock on the door served as a welcome distraction from these disquieting thoughts. She hurried to answer it and found none other than a beaming, round-faced Alex waiting there.

The stocky woman from the terrace waited behind him, smiling benevolently.

"I'm so glad Papa let you stay!" Alex enthused. "Mrs. Trench says that gentlemen aren't generally permitted to visit ladies' bedrooms, but since she is here and I am only eight, we might make an exception."

Daphne laughed. "I am glad to hear it because I am leaving straight after breakfast tomorrow, and I might have had to leave without saying goodbye."

Alex's smile faded. "You're leaving?"

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“Well, yes. I have to go home, you see. I left quite a mess behind me.”

Alex glanced over his shoulder at the governess. “Can’t you persuade her to stay, Mrs. Trench?”

“The decision isn’t ours, Master Alexander,” Mrs. Trench answered gently. “But I’m sure your paths will cross again. When you’re older.”

Alex sighed. “When I’m older, when I’m older. All the good things only happen when I’m older.”

“That’s the sad thing about being eight,” Daphne agreed. “You have to wait for life to get really good. Just try and enjoy being eight, though. I certainly did. I spent all my time with my sister—we were inseparable.”

Alex only looked more morose. “I don’t have a brother or sister. It’s just me.”

Mrs. Trench cleared her throat. “We only agreed on a simple goodnight, Master Alexander. You’ve had a long day, and you need your rest. And so does Miss Belmont.”

“Oh, before I retire, could I ask whether a letter could be posted for me?” Daphne asked, blushing. “I know I’m asking a lot. I want to send a note to my sister, just to let her know that I’m safe and well. She’ll worry. She always worries about me.”

“Of course. Write the letter and have someone bring it to my room, and I’ll take care of it,” Mrs. Trench said, flashing her a smile.

“I wish somebody worried about me like that,” Alex muttered.

Daphne’s chest tightened. She met Mrs. Trench’s eyes over the top of Alex’s head and saw that the older woman’s expression was tight and resigned.

“Well, that’s not true,” she said quietly. “I was worried about you today because you were all alone. I was lucky to meet you.”

Alex brightened a little. “Really? You were happy to meet me?”

“Of course! Who wouldn’t be? And I’m sure that your Papa loves you very much. He was worried about you today—I saw it.”

Alex shook his head. “Papa doesn’t worry about things like that. He didn’t even come to say goodnight to me today. Mrs. Trench let me stay up for an hour past my bedtime to wait for him, but he didn’t come. He never comes.”

A lump formed in Daphne’s throat. This time, she didn’t dare look at Mrs. Trench.

The governess placed a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Come, Master Alexander. You need your sleep. We can’t delay any longer—it’s time for bed.”

Alex nodded. “Goodnight, Miss Belmont.”

He executed a surprisingly graceful bow for an eight-year-old boy.

Smiling, Daphne curtsied back.

Mrs. Trench led Alex back down the corridor, the two of them talking in low, hushed tones.

Daphne retreated into her bedroom, but any restfulness she'd felt was gone. She had never considered herself particularly fond of children or babies, but Alex was a sweet, little boy and surprisingly clever and kind for his age. He deserved better than a father who ignored him and scolded him. What parent could ignore their children in that way?

Perhaps I'm just lucky. For all his flaws, Papa was a good father, and Mama loves us with all her heart. Perhaps I don't understand how bad an uncaring parent can be.

But then the Duke didn't seem evil. Or cruel, the way Alex said that he was.

Ah, but I don't know him, do I? I don't know a thing about him.

No, it was no good. Despite his sharp manner, Daphne did not believe that the Duke was cruel. She'd seen cruel men before, and the Duke did not fit in with what she'd seen.

Somebody should tell him.

I bet nobody has ever tried to tell him. I was sure he cared about his son. I could see it. But if he's like that with Alex—all brusque and unfriendly—well, of course, an eight-year-old boy isn't going to respond to that!

If somebody would only tell him... just give him a little nudge in the right direction...

Daphne stood at the edge of the bed, her hands on her hips, and stared down at the new dress she'd been given. It was a simple design, easy enough to put on herself. She could put it on, wander through the house...

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I did promise that he wouldn't even know that I was here...

Daphne stared down at the gown for another minute or two. Really, she suspected that she'd already made up her mind. It wasn't as if she would get any other opportunity beyond tonight.

Sighing, she reached for the dress.

Edward opened a book of ledgers and stared unseeingly at the figures. He could usually work late into the night, but now he found himself distracted. He kept thinking about Miss Belmont.

It's only because she's beautiful. I can't remember when I last spent time in a lady's company.

Not that Miss Belmont had looked much like a lady, soaking wet and covered in mud. But even so, Edward had felt that familiar, answering pull of arousal. How long had it been since he'd felt it? Too long, for certain.

He slammed the ledger shut with a groan, leaning back and covering his face with his hands.

This is ridiculous. Am I truly so reclusive that even the sight of a pretty woman sends me reeling?

It hardly mattered. She would be gone in the morning, and he would never see her again. That was a relief, wasn't it? He could concentrate on his work here and on

getting his son to behave while simultaneously convincing him not to hate his father.

So far, things did not seem to be going well.

Nobody warned me that it would be so hard. I thought it would be the easiest thing in the world, to be a better parent than he was. And yet here I am, struggling. Oh, I'm such a fool.

Why did I ever think I could do this? Why did I think I could be better than him? I might as well give up and ship the boy off to Eton now. Maybe they'll take better care of him than I can.

Suddenly, a tap sounded at the door. Edward flinched, sitting upright. He couldn't imagine who would be calling on him this late at night. Not Clarissa, not after he'd all but dismissed her earlier. Mrs. Trench would have retired, and Peter had gone to bed about an hour ago.

Edward cleared his throat. "Enter."

The door swung open, and it was, of course, Miss Belmont. He felt like a fool for imagining that it could be anyone else.

Edward leaned back in his seat with a sigh. "What do you want?"

"Good evening to you too, Your Grace."

"I hope you're remembering your promise not to try and seduce me."

Her eyebrows shot up towards her hairline. "Goodness, you have a high opinion of yourself. I can assure you that you are not in danger from me, not if you were the last man in the world."

Edward did not have a response to that. It suddenly occurred to him that he was in his shirtsleeves, with his shirt undone to reveal a triangle of skin at his chest. Her gaze kept flicking downwards as if drawn by magnetism.

He cleared his throat, and her gaze jumped upwards.

“I suppose I look different when I don’t appear to have been soaking in a pond for a day or two,” she said, holding out her arms.

“You do look drier,” he heard himself say.

She was wearing a pale green gown, obviously one of Clarissa’s on account of it being far too long for her. The hem trailed on the ground, and the sleeves all but covered her hands. It was loose and should have looked like a sack on her.

That was probably why Clarissa had chosen it. Even now, she liked to be the most beautiful woman in the room.

And yet, somehow, Miss Belmont looked...

Well, he couldn’t explain how she looked.

Good enough to eat.

He was not sure where that thought had come from and recoiled ever so slightly from it.

“Come, Miss Belmont,” he said sharply. “Tell me why you are here, at once.”

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Daphne was gawping like a fool. The Duke looked like... well, he looked the way she might imagine some of those suave, handsome heroes in the novels that Emily tried to keep hidden from the rest of them. A faint fuzz of black hair peeked from his half-open shirt, and she could not stop imagining how his skin might feel. Warm, yes, and smooth. Would his skin twitch under her touch, like a horse's hide? Would she feel his heart beating against her palm if she placed her hand just right?

Stop it! You've known the man for no more than a minute!

Besides, you're here on an important errand.

Daphne cleared her throat, tilting up her chin. "I am sorry to bother you, Your Grace, but I?—"

"How did you find me? Did someone direct you to my study?"

There was an edge to his voice that indicated that any servant who had sent her his way might find themselves in trouble.

Daphne bit her lip. "It took me a while, but yours is the only occupied room downstairs. I saw the light under your door, and guessed."

"Hmm. Go on."

"Well, I daresay it's none of my business, but it's about Alex. Master Alexander, I mean." The Duke's face tightened, and Daphne continued quickly before she lost her nerve. "He's upset. I think you should go and talk to him, for what it's worth. He

loves you dearly, and you didn't even come to see him tonight, although you'd promised that you would. He came to see me—which perhaps he shouldn't have done, but he's only eight, and he wanted to say goodnight, so I'm sure there's no harm in it—and I know how upset he is, and it really isn't fair. I think you care for him, Your Grace. I truly do. So I thought I must come and talk to you, frankly. He thinks you don't care for him!"

The Duke only stared at her for a long moment. After this little speech, Daphne found herself out of breath. She longed to speak, to fill the silence—she had always hated lengthy pauses—but she forced herself to be quiet and wait.

"Perhaps I don't care for him," the Duke responded. "Perhaps keeping my distance from him is the only way to protect him. Men of my standing often don't consider or care for their children at all. What do you think of that?"

She clenched her jaw. "I think that it's not true, Your Grace."

He rose to his feet, his broad shoulders seeming to fill the room. "Then you are very naive, Miss Belmont. Naive and sheltered."

She bristled. "I am not naive. Neither am I sheltered. If you only knew what my family has gone through..."

"I do hope you're not here to tell me all about it tonight."

She wilted. "No, of course not."

"Good. Then let me tell you this, Miss Belmont. You are right."

She blinked. "I'm... right?"

“Yes. You are right. This is none of your concern. In the future, I would suggest that you do not take it upon yourself to poke your nose into the families of others?—”

“I...”

“—especially when you are a guest. You do not know me, and you don’t know Alex. So, I would argue that you have nothing to add to this conversation. I daresay that this is not what you wanted to hear, Miss Belmont, but there it is.”

Daphne opened her mouth to say something else. In a flash, the Duke had crossed the room and cupped his palm over her mouth. Not hard, of course. It was barely a feather-light touch. But it was enough to make Daphne almost choke on her words.

She stared up at him, her eyes wide. He was close enough that their noses were almost brushing, and he leaned down to look into her eyes.

For the first time, Daphne noticed that the man had a peculiar scent. Crushed grass, perhaps? Earth turned over after rain? Whatever it was, it was peculiar, and Daphne had to fight not to breathe in deeply.

Abruptly, he withdrew his hand. Callused fingers brushed the underside of her chin—such a quick and subtle gesture that she thought she might have imagined it.

“That’s quite enough, Miss Belmont,” he said, his voice low, almost a growl. “I am not a man of many words, and hearing too many gives me a headache. I’m not accustomed to repeating myself over and over, so I shall say this one more time. Do not involve yourself in my family. You will leave quietly, tomorrow, and that is that.” He straightened up, his piercing gaze fixed on her.

He had blue eyes, Daphne noticed suddenly, the same shade as Alex’s.

“Go to bed, Miss Belmont.”

There was really nothing else to do but obey.

Daphne stormed to the landing, her skirts swishing, muttering angrily to herself under her breath. She did not notice a small boy darting behind a curtain as she approached, staying motionless and silent as she passed by.

Once she was gone, Alex risked peering out from his hiding place.

His little heart was pounding. He was meant to be in bed, of course, but he knew that Mrs. Trench slept soundly once she drifted off, and if he were quiet, he could move around without waking her.

He also knew that if the door to his father's study stood ajar and he crouched on the landing, he could hear every word exchanged inside.

I cannot believe Miss Belmont tried to talk to Papa like that. Nobody's ever talked to Papa like that. And she was so kind and so nice to me. It's a pity she can't stay longer.

She would not be staying longer, however. That had been made clear. While he was getting ready for bed, Mrs. Trench had talked a little more about propriety and how strict the rules could be for ladies. She made it plain that he should never speak about Miss Belmont's presence here, as it could be damaging both to her reputation and the Duke's.

"What would happen if her reputation was ruined?" he'd asked, and Mrs. Trench had sighed.

"Hard to say," she answered, gesturing for him to climb into bed. "Women with ruined reputations have to marry, and quickly. Marriage is the only safety for a woman in this world, unfortunately."

That did seem unfair, but there was nothing Alex could do about it, of course. Not

until he was older.

A plan was forming in his head, so daring that it made his heart thump. He crouched down by the banister, peering down into the hallway below. The door to his father's study was still open, and he could hear the man pacing up and down, muttering angrily, just as Miss Belmont had done.

Suddenly decided, Alex got to his feet and crept down the stairs.

I know who'll help me.

A thin beam of light coming from under the door indicated that Peter Tinn was not yet asleep.

The steward had always been very fond of Alex, and hopefully, this would work in his favor.

The man answered the door, blinking down at Alex in surprise.

"Master Alex? It is too late for you to be awake," he said, frowning. "What are you doing in the servants' quarters? Is something the matter? Is it His Grace?"

"No, no, Papa is fine," Alex said hastily, hearing the edge of worry in the steward's voice. "But... but I am worried about Papa. He's so miserable and so lonely, and I don't..." he trailed off, swallowing hard. "I'm only eight, so I don't understand how things work, I suppose. But I have an idea, which might make him happier in the long run, and I hoped you'd hear me out, at least."

Peter narrowed his eyes at him. "An idea? What sort of idea? And why do you need to tell me about it? Why can't Jemim—Mrs. Trench, that is—help?"

Alex sighed. “She’d never agree. And I would need you to do something for me—to send off a letter right now, tonight.”

“Tonight?”

He nodded. “Yes. It would need to be sent tonight, as tomorrow might be too late.”

Peter leaned against the doorframe, folding his arms across his chest. “Well, I’m intrigued. I’m rather getting the impression that this is all very hush-hush, and not a word of this should be breathed to anyone.”

“Yes, please, Peter. You can’t tell anybody.”

The steward pursed his lips, considering. “And who would I be sending this letter to?”

Alex drew in a breath. “To a publisher in London. I know exactly which one. You can be there and back before dawn.”

Peter’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “A publisher? Whatever for? What’s in the letter?”

“Ah. That’s the clever part. Or at least, I hope it is.”

CHAPTER 6

Daphne woke up and spent a full minute trying to work out where she was.

When the memory of last night returned to her, she groaned aloud and pressed her face into the pillow.

What was I thinking? I've humiliated myself beyond belief this time. And then, to cap it all off, I stormed into my host's study late at night and tried to tell him how to raise his child.

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Oh yes, very well done, Daphne. Just when it seems there's no other way for you to embarrass yourself, you stoop to a new low.

At least I know he'll keep quiet about it. He must be just as mortified as I am.

She rose and dressed listlessly, combing out her hair and pinning it up. She was hungry but was not looking forward to wandering around the house and looking for the breakfast room. At least she could be reasonably sure that she would be breakfasting alone. Who would want to exchange pleasantries with her after the show she'd made of herself the previous night?

The ground level of the house seemed to be deserted and was notably silent. Daphne didn't believe she'd ever spent such a quiet morning. In their house, it was all chaos and chatter. None of them seemed to be able to bear a moment's silence. Even Emily, who they thought of as very meek and quiet, was not considered to be reserved by Society's standards. The Belmont girls were chatterboxes, everybody knew that, and they got the trait from their mother.

The silence, then, was oppressive.

Daphne was just starting to despair of ever finding any breakfast when a man stepped out of a room and closed the door behind him. She recognized the steward from last night and hurried towards him.

"Excuse me, Sir!"

He paused, just about to stride off, and shot her a shrewd look. "Miss Belmont, good

morning. I trust you slept well.”

She cleared her throat. “Uh, well enough. Where is the breakfast room? I was promised breakfast before I left. Oh, and what time will the carriage be here for me?”

The steward blinked at her. “Carriage?”

“Yes, His Grace said that he would send me home in one of his carriages.”

There was an odd look on the steward’s face, one that Daphne could not quite interpret. “Ah. I imagine Edward would offer that, yes. Well, breakfast is in here, the room I’ve just left. The table is all set. The Duke and the Dowager Duchess are in there already.”

With that, the steward turned on his heel, shooting her one last curious look, and left her staring after him.

So much for a peaceful breakfast, then. She sighed. Come on, then. No time for cowardice.

Not giving herself a chance to change her mind, she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

She was immediately met by raised voices.

“How dare you do this to your name?” came an angry feminine voice. “To yourself? To your child? Tome? Do you not remember the last time you made such an infamous appearance in the scandal sheets?”

Well, it was too late for Daphne to dart out again. She froze in the doorway, taking in the scene.

The breakfast room was not the cavernous space she'd imagined. It was not a proper breakfast room, but a comfortable, little parlor converted and used as a breakfast room. The space was dominated by a long, well-polished table set with silver dishes, and a fire crackled in the hearth, warding off the chill of the morning.

The Duke of Thornbridge sat sprawled in a chair by the fire, pressing the fingers of one hand against his forehead. In his other hand, he held a crumpled piece of paper.

An older woman stood in front of him, coldly beautiful and immaculately dressed, her arms folded tight. They hadn't noticed her yet.

Perhaps I could just sneak out again. I won't die if I miss breakfast.

Alex and Mrs. Trench sat at the table, quietly eating their breakfast.

Alex perked up at the sight of Daphne. "Hello, Miss Belmont!"

Bother. Too late to escape, then.

The Duke and the older woman flinched when Alex spoke, their heads snapping around to look at Daphne.

The woman's eyes narrowed, and she stalked towards Daphne. Daphne felt the urge to cower.

"So, this is the woman, then," she spat. "You are pretty, but not nearly pretty enough to make up for what you've brought upon us."

"B-Brought upon you?" Daphne stammered. "I don't understand."

The woman—the Dowager Duchess, no doubt—sneered. "Oh, I'm sure you

understand perfectly. What you've brought upon us?—”

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“Upon me,” the Duke interrupted, his voice low and rough.

The Dowager Duchess flinched, glancing uncertainly at him. “I... I beg your pardon, Edward?”

The Duke leaned forward, scowling. He did not look at Daphne.

“All of this, Clarissa, has been brought upon me. Me, my family, my title, my name. Whatever these scandal sheets say, it is I who will bear the consequences. Don’t forget your place.”

The Dowager Duchess flinched. “My place? May I remind you that I was married to your father, Edward!”

“But that does not make you my mother!” Edward shot back at once.

There was an awful silence after that.

Clarissa had gone pale, her lips almost disappearing into a thin line. The Duke seemed a little taken aback by his own words. Regretful, perhaps? He said nothing, though, and the awful moment dragged on and on.

Daphne wished she could sink through the floor. She wished she was anywhere but here. She briefly contemplated throwing herself out of the window. She could probably smash through the glass if she got a good run-up.

“Excuse me,” Clarissa said, her voice tight and shaking.

Without waiting for a response, she strode out of the room, knocking her shoulder against Daphne's on the way.

Another silence followed, but this time, Daphne was ready for it.

"Something terrible has clearly happened," she said, her voice a little too loud for the silence, "and I would appreciate it if somebody told me what's going on."

The Duke rose to his feet, glaring at her. "Don't play the innocent, little goose with me," he snarled. "This is all your doing."

"My doing? What, exactly, have I done?"

He stared at her for a long moment. Daphne forced herself to meet his gaze squarely.

I'm not afraid of you, Sir. You can shout down all the others and bully your stepmother, but none of that will work with me.

He slammed down the crumpled bit of paper on the table.

"Read that," he said shortly. "Then come to my study. At once, do you hear?"

Daphne opened her mouth to say that she was not in the habit of taking orders from anyone, least of all him, but he did not wait to hear her reply, storming out of the room at once.

There seemed little else to do but move over to the crumpled piece of paper. She was aware of both Alex and Mrs. Trench's eyes on her.

She recognized the paper at once. It was a page from one of the most widely-read scandal sheets in London, *The Watchful Chaperone*. Heart sinking, Daphne began to

read.

She Protected Her Sister But Could Not Protect Herself!

Dedicated Readers of *The Watchful Chaperone* will be appalled and thrilled to hear about the latest scandal. Once again, the Belmont name has appeared in our papers, alongside another infamous name.

Only yesterday, polite society was shocked by a display of wanton deceit and a runaway bride. Miss Emily Belmont, due to marry the illustrious Duke of Clapton, was replaced upon her wedding day by her very own twin sister, Miss Daphne Belmont. For what reasons, this author cannot say, but rest assured that she shall get to the bottom of this. The sharp-eyed Duke noticed the villainous swap at once, and Miss Daphne promptly bolted, leaving the poor gentleman at the altar.

But the story is not over yet. Miss Daphne Belmont fled the church and is said to have made a beeline to none other than the estate of the Duke of Thornbridge, a name familiar to long-time readers of these sheets. An infamous recluse, the Beastly Duke has kept his distance from Society for many years, giving rise to speculation about the Thornbridge curse, which may well target innocent female members of that family. A source close to the Duke himself confirmed that Miss Belmont did indeed spend the night—unchaperoned!—under the Duke's roof. Scandalous, indeed!

However, speculation must naturally arise about why Miss Belmont went straight to the Duke's estate. A coincidence? Hardly. The meeting was most clearly arranged ahead of time, and one must wonder whether Miss Belmont intended to marry the Duke of Clapton at all. Perhaps she had her sights firmly set on another prize. Or perhaps the Duke of Thornbridge has woven his dastardly magic on a naive and thoughtless young girl.

A fatal mistake, Miss Daphne Belmont! For now, you are a warning example held up

to other errant ladies.

It is clear, of course, that Miss Daphne cannot return to Society until this matter is concluded. No doubt this is an irrevocable fall. One is inclined to remember the elder Miss Belmont, now the Duchess of Langdon, who was unfortunately jilted and left at the altar, and hastily contracted marriage with the Duke of Langdon, the elder brother of her groom-to-be. Could such unluckiness in marriage descend through a family? This author believes so.

And so, dearest readers, this author shall continue to investigate and will keep dedicated readers updated on the latest scandals and developments. Best of luck, Miss Belmont! You have our pity. Or is it the Beastly Duke we should feel sorry for?

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Daphne crumpled the paper. She felt faintly sick. Glancing over at the table, she found Alex and Mrs. Trench staring at her.

“Have you read this?” she asked, directing her attention to Mrs. Trench.

The governess shook her head. “No, but I know what’s in it. Pay it no mind, Miss Belmont. Those gossip sheets are rags. Nobody should listen to them.”

Daphne bit her lower lip, hard. “But people do listen to them. Everybody does read them. Oh, bother. I’m in deeper trouble than I could have imagined.”

Mrs. Trench paused for a moment, then nodded sorrowfully. “I think perhaps you are. I’m sorry for all this, Miss Belmont.”

“But the Dowager Duchess was in the house all night, wasn’t she? Won’t that count for something?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it’s not quite good enough. My advice, Miss Belmont, is to go and talk it over with His Grace.”

Daphne wilted a little at that suggestion.

No wonder he was so furious. He thinks I was out to catch him, after all.

Still, she couldn’t put off the meeting for much longer. Sighing, Daphne tossed the paper into the fire and strode out of the room.

At least I know the way to the Duke's study.

CHAPTER 7

The study was eerily silent when Daphne approached. She stepped warily inside, and there he was, standing in front of the window with his back turned and his arms folded.

"Close the door."

She did so, leaning against it and eyeing him suspiciously.

"You're quite an accomplished liar, Miss Belmont," he said, not turning around. "I can't believe I was foolish enough to fall for it. All that nonsense about it being an accident, about only needing to stay for one night. Well, one night was all you needed, wasn't it? You've ruined me, and yourself in the bargain."

Daphne bristled. "I haven't lied to you."

He spun around. "Oh no? After reading that article, you think you can still look me in the eye and say you've been honest with me?"

She took a step forward, holding his stare. His face was flushed red, his eyes glittering.

"I didn't tell you why I ran from London, admittedly. But then again, you didn't ask, did you?"

"So, the scandal sheets were right, weren't they? You tried to take your sister's place at the altar and fled when you were found out?"

She blinked, dropping her gaze. Something like shame welled up inside her. Not shame at being found out, of course. She didn't give a fig about that. No, shame at not being able to go through with it.

I couldn't save her, not when it came to it. That's another thing the scandal sheet was wrong about. I didn't protect my sister.

"Yes, that was true," she answered, tilting up her chin. "If you must know, Emily was being blackmailed into marriage. The scandal sheets didn't pick up on that, I see. She couldn't do it, so I went in her place. I thought I wouldn't mind, that I'd be happy enough to be a duchess, but I panicked at the last moment."

And he found me out.

She wisely did not mention it.

I'm not sure how he found me out. We look the same. And why would he care? Surely it can make no difference to him if he marries me or Emily. And what will happen to her now that I'm gone? Will she be forced to marry him anyway?

She shook this unpleasant thought out of her head and continued.

"So, you see, Your Grace. If I were trying to catch a powerful husband, why would I abandon one duke at the altar for another? The Duke of Clapton is just as rich as you are and much more handsome. And sociable, too. And he lives in London."

The Duke gave a harsh laugh, crossing the room to throw himself into a chair by the fire.

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“Oh, you think he’s more handsome than me? Why should I care about that?”

She blinked. “Why in the world was that the part you felt you had to mention? My point is that fortune-hunting ladies who are willing to do all sorts of things to catch dukes do not much care which one they marry. If I were such a woman, I certainly would not throw away one duke in order to catch another one who is eminently less agreeable, would I?”

There was a long pause after that. The Duke stared at her, his brow furrowed, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“No, I suppose you would not,” he conceded, at last.

“And I turned up here in such a state, remember?” she continued, pushing her advantage. “I was filthy, and disheveled, and bedraggled. What woman would dare to try to catch anyone while looking like that?”

The Duke narrowed his eyes at her. “Ah, but there’s the catch, isn’t it? You knew you looked very alluring in that state, but you could still feign innocence while knowing exactly what effect it would have.”

There was a long, pregnant pause.

“Alluring,” Daphne repeated faintly. “I’m sorry, Your Grace, are you saying that I looked alluring? I looked like a hag! The grubbiest hag in Christendom! Any respectable man would be shocked. Of course,” she couldn’t help adding, “if you do find women coated in mud very attractive, then I can’t?—”

“Oh, that’s enough,” he snapped, bouncing to his feet and striding across the room.

For a moment, Daphne thought he was going to walk right out of the room and leave her standing there like a fool. Instead, he headed for a glass whiskey decanter on the sideboard and poured himself a generous measure. Gulping it down in one mouthful, he immediately began to pour himself a second glass. Pausing, he glanced over his shoulder.

“Do you drink whiskey, Miss Belmont?”

Of course, Daphne did not drink whiskey. Ladies never drank spirits or things like that, and whiskey and brandy were firmly men’s beverages. Her mother drank brandy on occasion, but never in public. Daphne couldn’t believe that the Duke did not realize this, so perhaps he simply did not care anymore.

“No,” she said, “but I’ll try some. It might steady my nerves,” she added, saying something she’d heard gentlemen say before.

He grunted, holding her gaze for a long moment. Then, he turned back, poured a second, generous glass of amber liquid, and held it out to her.

Daphne edged towards him, eyeing him warily. The anger seemed to have drained out of him, replaced by a sort of exhausted resignation. She took the glass carefully, trying to make sure their fingers did not touch. It was nearly impossible, and the side of his forefinger brushed hers ever so slightly, and a rush of something splintered down her arm, making her shiver.

He didn’t seem to notice her shudder, turning around and walking back to his desk. He didn’t sit down. Instead, he stood and stared down at the desk, which was covered in papers, ledgers, and books.

Daphne sniffed her drink cautiously. It smelled vile. Men drank it in big mouthfuls, didn't they? Best to get it over with. She took a modest gulp of the stuff and immediately choked.

Oh, it was awful. It tasted like... She couldn't even decide what it tasted like, only that it tasted bad, and it burned. Her face screwed up as she forced it down. Spitting it back into the glass would be a mistake, she thought. She'd have to drink the stuff now, one way or another.

Apparently, her choking was more audible than she thought. The Duke turned around to face her, smiling wryly.

"I would suggest small sips, Miss Belmont."

"Thank you," she rasped.

She would take a break before the next sip. Perhaps there'd be an opportunity to get rid of the drink, such as tipping it out of the window or hurling the glass, whiskey and all, at somebody's head in a dramatic fashion. The Duke's head, ideally.

"What did you do with the scandal sheet page, then?"

She winced. "I burned it. I hope you don't mind."

"What, did you think I was going to frame it and hang it on my wall?" he snorted. "Besides, variations of that story will be in every gossip column and scandal sheet in the country, as well as some of the proper newspapers. Burning that page won't solve our problem."

"No," she conceded. "But can't we just explain it all? Your stepmother was here, wasn't she? Won't that be good enough?"

“Of course, it won’t be good enough,” he snapped. “And even if it would be, it doesn’t matter—our reputations are already destroyed. It’s over for us both. We’ll never be forgiven. There’s only one way out of this.”

Daphne took another sip of the whiskey. Yes, it was still awful.

“Meaning?”

He held her gaze. “Meaning, Miss Belmont, you and I are going to marry.”

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The pause dragged out for at least a moment. The ticking of a grandfather clock in the corner counted off the seconds.

“I beg your pardon?” she managed, at last. “Marry? Each other?”

The Duke swallowed his whiskey and headed back across the room to get himself another.

“I think you heard me,” he responded. “I am open to other suggestions, by the way.”

“Well, there must be other ideas,” she shot back. “Why don’t we just go about our lives and ignore all this nonsense?”

“Ignore gossip? Ha! As if we could,” he snarled. “You don’t seem to understand how ruined you are, Miss Belmont. Your reputation was already in tatters the instant you left that church. And now this? Oh, you’ll never recover. Let me be clear. If you return to London, every friend that you think you have will turn their backs on you. And this will extend to your unmarried sister and your mother. Your married sister might escape, but only if she cuts you off. Disgrace is like gangrene. It spreads quickly and infects everything it touches. Society will cut you out like a festering sore and never think twice about it. You won’t be given credit in shops. There’ll be no invitations, not from anybody because they will be infected if they allow you in their homes. If you are rich already, you won’t starve. Not literally, at least. No one will speak to you. It’ll be as if you’re dead already, a ghost wandering through their old home. Disgrace can’t be shrugged off or ignored, Miss Belmont. I can tell you that now.”

He fell silent after his speech.

Daphne took a step back, shaken. “You sound as though you speak from experience,” she answered, her voice wobbling a little.

It seemed like the perfect time to sip her drink, so she did so.

Ugh.

“I do,” the Duke answered, rubbing a hand over his face. “The Beastly Duke. That is me. They say I’m cursed, you know. I only mention it because you must have read it in that wretched scandal sheet.”

“Why would they say that?”

He shook his head, turning away. “It doesn’t matter. My point is that I have already had my life ruined by gossip and malicious, anonymous writers. I won’t let them tear my son to pieces. I won’t.”

In one smooth motion, he drained his glass again, before setting it down with a clink.

Well, if he can, I can.

Taking a deep breath as though she were about to dive off a cliff, she swigged back the whiskey in one gulp, emptying her glass. It was awful, but the burning sensation was not entirely unpleasant. She already felt braver.

“I can’t marry a stranger because of some gossip,” she heard herself say. “No matter the consequences.”

He spun around, his eyes narrowing on her. “Aren’t you listening? We will marry,

Miss Belmont. And this time, you won't run away."

She folded her arms. "You are really impossible. Everybody knows that women's reputations are more fragile than men's. Here is what I propose—I shall take all the blame and go off and live as a spinster. My true friends will not abandon me, and my family won't. I can answer for it. Don't be a martyr, Your Grace."

"Don't be so flippant," he ground out. "Your friends and family will tell you the same thing I have told you. I should never have let you stay the night. It serves me right, I suppose. No good deed goes unpunished."

"A good deed?" she echoed, disbelievingly. "You were going to send me off into the night! I practically had to beg you to let me stay! Don't congratulate yourself yet, Your Grace."

"Oh, do be quiet. You are insufferable."

"You are insufferable!"

He ignored her retort, taking a step closer.

Daphne felt the urge to step away, not because he was looming over her but because she felt that oddly familiar tug of something in her gut, and it was making her uncomfortable. The knotting in her stomach was disarranging her thoughts, distracting her with uncalled-for and entirely inappropriate thoughts.

Such as a brief vision of herself stepping forward and reaching up to brush an untidy lock of hair from the Duke's forehead, and perhaps running the pad of her thumb over those ridiculous caterpillar eyebrows. Or perhaps dragging her palm down his chest, broad and powerful and straining against the beleaguered material of his shirt.

There seemed to be no softness to the man at all, and that thrilled her for reasons she could not quite fathom. He had thinnish lips, but they suited his face and were moistened by the whiskey. Daphne wondered, with a pleasurable shudder that terrified and thrilled her at the same time, whether his lips would taste of whiskey if she kissed them.

Stop it! Stop it at once!

She realized belatedly that the man was talking again. Ruining everything.

“You can live as a spinster if you become my wife,” he was saying, his thick arms folded across his chest.

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His eyes were narrowed, and the light spilling in through the window illuminated his figure, playing across the strong planes of his face.

Daphne, as usual, spoke without thinking twice.

“You look like a Greek statue.”

He stared at her, baffled. “What?”

“Nothing. Go on, then. What were you saying? I can’t be a spinster and a married woman.”

He leveled her with a scornful look. “Of course you can. We’ll marry, but the marriage will be in name only. You’ll lead your life, and I shall lead mine. In fact, I would prefer it this way. If I wanted to be married, I’d have found someone by now. You can have a set of rooms here—well away from mine—and we’ll stay out of each other’s way. You can do what you want, but don’t interfere in my life, or Alexander’s. Is that clear?”

She took a moment before responding.

“And then what? We live separate, lonely lives, quietly hating and resenting each other? What a lovely idea.”

He rolled his eyes. “Not forever, foolish girl. Just for a few years, until Society forgets about us. Once we’re married, they’ll lose interest. You’ll stay here for a few years, perhaps two or three, then go off and do whatever you like. Go wherever you

like. You'll have money, and I've got other houses."

"And what about children?" Daphne asked before she could stop herself.

The Duke went still, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

"I have a son," he said, his voice flat. "I don't want another. I don't want more children. Perhaps I wasn't clear. We won't be sharing rooms or beds, Miss Belmont. You will be a spinster, just as you wanted. I can promise you that I'll never touch you. You're quite safe from me."

Daphne narrowed her eyes at him. Perhaps it was the whiskey, but she felt exceptionally mischievous. The horror of the scandal sheet and her feelings of awkwardness had evaporated, and the whole business felt ridiculous.

Yes, it was definitely the whiskey. Had she drunk it too quickly? Almost certainly. Too quickly to shrug off the definite and upsetting sensation of disappointment.

I am not disappointed. Why should I be? Of course, the wretched man doesn't wish to share his bed with me. I don't want to share mine with him, either.

She cleared her throat, rolling back her shoulders. "Oh? Don't you like me then, Your Grace? I thought you found me so very alluring earlier when I was all wet and bedraggled. I rather got the impression that you liked women who looked as though they'd been ducked in and out of ponds all day."

She took a step forward and was immediately gratified that he took an instinctive step back.

Pushing her advantage, she stepped forward again. Once again, he backed away, bumping against the edge of his desk. They were too close now, closer than was

proper, and she could smell something fresh and crisp emanating from him.

“Perhaps it’s because I’m dry and clean now,” she sighed. “You must find me entirely repulsive. Perhaps you prefer someone a little softer, whodoesn’tsay what she thinks all the time? What a pity.”

Daphne was not sure what she expected from this interaction. A little blustering, perhaps? A blush?

She certainly had not expected the Duke to surge forward and wrap his arm around her waist. Overbalanced, she would have fallen in an undignified heap on her backside if he hadn’t steadied her, pulling her tight against him. Tight enough to feel his hard body against hers, tight enough to make her suck in a surprised breath. She could almost feel his heart beating against her chest. She had to tilt her head back to look at him.

Should I... struggle? Do I even want to?

Oh, heavens, I’m in trouble.

“No, you wretched, foolish woman,” he hissed, his voice low. “I do not find you repulsive. I find you unladylike, vexing, and entirely too outspoken—andyou meddle in business that is not yours—but I certainly do not find you repulsive. I can assure you that I wish with all my heart that I did.”

Before Daphne could gather her thoughts enough to respond to this deeply ungentlemanlike speech—she couldn’t even begin to imagine what she was going to say—he quite abruptly, without bothering to say a by-your-leave or even to give her a warning of what was about to happen, leaned down and kissed her full on the mouth.

CHAPTER 8

Daphne had never thought that kissing was particularly interesting. She'd caught glimpses of her older sister, Anna, kissing her husband, and the whole business did not seem appealing. They had appeared to enjoy it enough, but Daphne had been baffled as to why.

After that, she'd simply filed the memory away to be ignored and made sure she knocked and waited before walking into rooms in her sister's house.

Being kissed, however, was entirely different.

His lips did taste of whiskey. He was warm and firm, but not hard, not like a plank of wood. His arm around her waist was tight, and his fingers curled around her neck, leaving red-hot pathways of sensation in their wake. That tug returned to her gut, and this time Daphne could not fool herself that it was anything other than arousal.

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She wanted this. She wanted him. She wanted him to keep kissing her, his lips soft against hers, the blunt press of his teeth on her lower lip barely noticeable. He tightened his arm around her waist, his fingers cupping the back of her neck. What would those large, strong hands feel like elsewhere on her body? The front of her bodice, even?

Reaching out uncertainly, Daphne moved to touch his broad shoulders, intending to pull him closer, to let him know that?—

Abruptly, she was shoved away.

Staggering backward, Daphne regained her balance. Her face was flushed—she just knew it—and she could feel an errant tendril of hair tickling her neck. She glanced up at him, breathing hard as if she'd just run a mile.

“What...?” she managed before the Duke spoke up.

“I am sorry,” he said, his face rigid and blank. “I don’t know why I did that. I shouldn’t have done it. I beg your pardon.”

She cleared her throat, wishing the color would leave her cheeks. Her head felt as if it were going to explode. “I’m not offended. But Your Grace?—”

“I meant what I said,” he interrupted. His arms hung heavy at his sides, and she noticed that his fingers were curled into fists.

“I... what?” she managed.

He sighed, turning away. “I didn’t want a wife. I don’t want companionship or anything more physical. I don’t need more children. I can barely manage the one I’ve got. No children, no sharing of lives. Just a plain marriage, in name only, to save both of our reputations and Alex’s. I should not have done that, Miss Belmont, and I hope you’ll forgive me. It won’t happen again.”

She flinched a little at that.

He’d put emphasis on the word, for clarity. In case she got ideas.

Well, I don’t want it to happen again, either, she felt like shouting, although that might be a case of the lady protesting too much.

Instead, she took a leaf out of Emily’s book. Despite a few recent faux pas, Emily tended to behave very well and made excellent choices.

Daphne folded her arms over her chest and smiled as gracefully as she could. “I accept your apology. And I accept your offer of marriage, Your Grace. You are right—I really don’t have any other choice.”

He breathed out slowly, his broad shoulders sagging. “Right. Well. In that case, I—” He broke off at the sound of running footsteps, his heavy eyebrows lowering into a frown.

There was an impatient tap on the door. Not waiting for a response, the door opened, and a red-faced and breathless Peter Tinn stumbled inside.

“We have unexpected guests, Your Grace,” he gasped. “It’s... It’s Miss Belmont’s family. They’re here. And they’re furious.”

‘Unexpected guests’ was not an accurate description. Daphne did not find herself

surprised. Of course, her family would come the instant they read that scandal sheet with everybody else.

The Duke had told her roughly that he would leave her to go ahead and manage her family, and he would join them soon to iron out any details. And that was that—she was engaged and dismissed in the course of a couple of sentences.

It's the stuff romances are made of.

Daphne could hear raised voices from an open door down the hallway—one of the parlors, she thought—and quickened her pace.

It was her mother's voice, of course.

"... and I insist on seeing my daughter at once," Octavia was saying, her voice raised to a shout. "You cannot keep her from me. We have the Duke and Duchess of Langdon here, so don't start thinking she's some friendless pauper. This is an outrage."

Daphne heard the steward's voice quavering back, trying and failing to calm down the livid woman.

Looks like I came in the nick of time, she snorted inwardly as she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

All conversation ceased, and five heads swiveled towards her. Theodore, Anna, Octavia, and, of course, Emily. And, naturally, the beleaguered Peter Tinn.

"You're safe," Emily said, speaking first. Her voice wobbled, and her eyes were red-rimmed.

She was wearing an old pair of spectacles with a crack on one of the lenses, and

Daphne guiltily remembered tearing her sister's other spectacles off her face as she rode, losing them in the undergrowth.

"I'm safe," she echoed.

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“There you are, you see,” the steward said, sounding thoroughly annoyed. “As I told you, ladies and gentlemen. Well, gentleman. Miss Belmont is entirely safe and happy. No harm has been done to her. I shall leave you to speak. Tea will come soon, and the Duke of Thornbridge will join you shortly.”

Octavia whirled around. “I hope he does join us because I am going to rip his head off his shoulders. How dare he compromise my daughter in such a way?”

“I’m not sure that would do anyone any good, Mama,” Anna remarked wryly. “Daphne was already compromised—they both are, in fact—and no doubt the poor Duke was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“You should listen to her, my dear mother-in-law,” Theodore drawled. He’d sprawled over a chaise longue nearby, one arm thrown dramatically over his face. “And you can’t kill the man—the only way Daphne can ever be seen in polite society again is if she marries the fellow.”

There was an awkward silence after that.

Peter Tinn cleared his throat. “Do excuse me. I’ll fetch my master and be back soon.”

Then, he scuttled out of the room as if he couldn’t get out quickly enough. No sooner had the door slammed shut than Emily was on her sister, her arms wrapped tightly around her as if she feared she might melt away.

“I thought you’d died in the forest,” Emily whispered, her voice tight. “I thought you’d fallen and broken your neck, or been kidnapped, or ran into bandits. Oh, I

imagined the worst.”

“No bandits or kidnappers,” Daphne replied, hugging her sister back. “I ran into the Duke of Thornbridge instead.”

Octavia cleared her throat, laying a hand on her daughter’s arm. “Things could have been worse, Daphne. They could have been much better, too. I’m just glad you are unharmed. Now, we need to do damage control. You’ve destroyed your reputation, and Emily, too, will suffer.”

“What about the Duke of Clapton?” Daphne asked.

Quick, meaningful glances were exchanged between the family.

“Never mind that now,” Octavia said stoutly. “We’re all safe, my dear.”

“Well, now that we’re here, we can go home,” Daphne sniffed. “I’m quite tired of this place.”

There was another silence, longer and heavier this time.

“Daphne,” Anna said carefully, stepping forward, “I’m not sure you understand the problem here.”

“Nothing has happened,” Daphne hastily assured her sister. “He let me stay the night because I was covered in mud, and his stepmother stayed here, too. It’s just gossip.”

Theodore spoke up, not moving from his position. “I’m afraid it’s a little worse than that, my dear. In the eyes of Society, you jilted a man at the altar and ran straight to another man. That’s essentially an elopement. Worse than an elopement, since you went directly to his house, unchaperoned, and stayed the night.”

Daphne swallowed hard. “What are you saying, Theo?”

Theodore removed his arm from where it was slung over his eyes and looked at her. “You’re a clever girl, Daphne. I won’t act as though you haven’t considered this. You know that you can never return home, never return to Society, unless you marry the Duke of Thornbridge. You have to marry him here before you can ever think of going back to London.”

Daphne blinked, sinking into a chair. She was glad there was one behind her because she might have just sunk onto the ground otherwise.

“Oh,” she said in a small voice. “There really isn’t any hope, then. I do have to marry him.”

Theo pulled himself into a sitting position and nodded sadly.

Anna reached out, laying a hand on his shoulder, and he placed his hand over hers.

Daphne found herself grappling with an unfamiliar sensation of jealousy. She knew her sister was in love with her husband and vice versa. They were happy, even if they hadn’t begun that way.

I’ll never fall in love. Not that I thought I would, but there’s a difference between something never happening because you don’t want it to and never happening because it can’t happen.

She swallowed hard, fighting to compose herself.

“There are worse men to marry, I suppose,” she said, with false brightness. “I can’t think of any at the moment, but?—”

“Oh, Daff, this is all my fault,” Emily burst out, covering her face with her hands. “How could I have been so foolish? If I’d done my duty and just married the wretched Duke of Clapton when I was meant to, you’d be safe and happy. This is all my fault. And now, you have to marry the Cursed Duke.”

Daphne took her sister’s hand and squeezed it. “It’s not your fault, Emily. Really, it’s not. As to the Duke, I just... Wait. You said he was cursed?”

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There were more meaningful glances exchanged, but nobody hurried to answer her question.

She glanced around and spoke again. “The article in the scandal sheet called him cursed, too. What curse? What’s going on?”

Octavia sighed heavily and opened her mouth to speak. But she was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hallway.

The door opened without ado, and a pair of servants bearing tea trays strode in. They were followed by the Duke of Thornbridge.

Daphne could see at once that he’d tidied himself up, brushing his hair, straightening his collar, and throwing on a better jacket. A cravat pin glimmered at his throat now, the cravat folds done in a simple yet gentlemanly style.

In short, he looked every inch the Duke. He didn’t even appear to be put off by the glares he received.

“Lady St. Maur,” he said, bowing to Octavia. “Duke, Duchess. Miss Emily Belmont. It’s a pleasure to have you here. I’m only sorry we aren’t meeting under better circumstances.”

“So am I,” Octavia managed, at last. “As you can see, my daughter is the Duchess of Langdon, and my son-in-law is the Duke of Langdon. Daphne is not alone, or friendless, or penniless. If you think you can take advantage?—”

He held up a hand, and to Daphne's amazement, her mother fell silent.

I really must learn that trick.

"I'm not sure what Miss Belmont has told you," he said, holding Octavia's gaze steadily, "but I believe she's informed you of the unfortunate circumstances surrounding this incident. We were both put in an impossible situation—she needed shelter, and I was obliged to offer it—but nothing would have come of it without that article. There's no sense in wishing things were otherwise."

"Agreed," Anna said, taking a step forward. Her eyes were narrowed, and she took in every detail. The Duke didn't seem put off by her stare and returned it blatantly. "I'm sure you must realize that there is only one solution. You and Daphne must wed."

He inclined his head. "You are correct."

"The scandal sheet claimed that a source close to you revealed the story," Emily suddenly spoke up. She was standing close to her twin as if for comfort, and her hand clutched Daphne's tightly. She was nervous, clearly. "Who could it be?"

The Duke pursed his lips. "I can't think. My household is extremely loyal, and I know they care about my son. I can't imagine that any of them would betray me. Either way, it will be my responsibility to work out, I think."

Emily inclined her head. "Of course, Your Grace."

"So, about this marriage," Octavia spoke up, her eyes narrowed. "You will marry my daughter?"

"Of course, Lady St. Maur. As I said before, my reputation is destroyed, too. Can you imagine what the scandal sheets would say about me if I were perceived to have

ruined a lady and then refused to marry her?” He gave a short, mirthless laugh. “They already call me beastly. You’d be surprised, Miss Belmont, to see how quickly they begin calling you an innocent girl ruined by a villain. Not that your reputation would ever be restored, of course.”

“I’m familiar with the contradictions of Society,” Daphne heard herself say. “I’ve already agreed to marry you, so I suppose we should get it over with.”

The Duke’s eyebrow rose at that, but he gave no sign of being amused or offended by what she’d said. He was showing admirable composure, and Daphne couldn’t help but feel baffled.

Where had this cool, lofty composure been earlier when he was speaking to her? Why was he only playing the gentleman now?

“I’ll apply for a special license to allow us to marry quickly,” the Duke said, turning to face the family again. It was as if he’d forgotten about Daphne already. “We should do things properly, to avoid further scandal and more gossip. The special license will take time, but it will doubtless not be denied. I will host the wedding here. Miss Belmont will, of course, have to stay—she can hardly go back to London now—but you may all stay with her if you wish.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Octavia managed. “I would prefer to stay with my daughter.”

He inclined his head. “You can all stay. Rooms are being prepared as we speak. I can’t imagine you brought your things, so my footmen will be sent back to your homes to collect them. My stepmother will stay here, too. Things must proceed with absolute propriety from now on. I’m sure you all understand.”

“It’s rather too late for that, don’t you think?” Theo remarked, earning himself a

chilly glare from the Duke.

“Nothing has happened between us,” the Duke answered crisply. “Miss Belmont will confirm that, I’m sure. This unfortunate circumstance is simply bad luck.”

Theo tilted his head, pursing his lips. “Bad luck, you say? Bad luck for whom? For Daphne or yourself?”

The Duke’s glare intensified. “For both of us.”

Theo shrugged, rolling onto his back again, making himself comfortable on the chaise longue. “If you say so. You’re getting a rather lovely wife out of all this, though, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t want a wife,” the Duke snapped back.

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The two Dukes aren't going to be best friends, then.

Daphne smothered a laugh. It was a little hysterical, and she was forced to press her hand to her mouth to contain herself.

The Duke shot her a quick, questioning glance but said nothing. He turned back to Octavia instead.

“You can take this room as a family parlor. I'm not a particularly good host, and I haven't had guests in a long time. Make yourselves at home. I imagine you'll meet my son sooner or later. I'll speak to you more about the wedding plans once the application for the special license is sent off.”

Octavia nodded slowly. “I know how to organize a wedding.”

“I don't intend to have much of one. I hope you understand, but this is not a happy occasion for me. A quick ceremony is all I require.”

Daphne glanced up at her mother, who seemed displeased.

At last, Octavia sighed and nodded. “Very well then.”

“Good.” The Duke gave a brisk nod and turned towards the door. “I'll leave you all to catch up and settle in. Let's just concentrate on not allowing anything to go wrong, shall we? Dinner is served at seven o'clock. Sharp.”

“You don’t like him, do you?”

Daphne glanced up at her sister, silhouetted against the window.

Do I like him? Do I like him? Well, of course not. He’s brusque and vexing and clearly thinks that I am vexatious.

She swallowed hard, trying her best not to remember the feel of his lips against hers, his fingertips sliding down the sensitive skin of her neck. She firmly forgot about the answering pull of desire low in her gut, the wanting that had crawled up from deep inside her.

“The Duke of Thornbridge? No, of course not,” she answered briskly. “Are you going to help me unpack?”

The afternoon was wearing on, and it would soon be time for the Duke’s seven o’clock sharp suppertime. Servants had been dispatched to fetch suitcases and boxes and had duly returned. Daphne was to stay in the same room she’d stayed in last night. She had assumed Emily would stay with her, but no. Emily had a different room. They were in Emily’s room at that moment, the boxes half unpacked, things strewn everywhere.

Conversation had crawled after the Duke left. Nobody seemed to have much to say.

Perhaps we’re all in shock.

Emily turned away from the window, sighing. “You don’t have to worry about unpacking my things, Daff. You should be... should be...”

“Should be what? Planning my wedding? No, thank you.”

Emily bit her lip, looking distraught. “Do you truly hate him, Daff?”

Daphne sighed. “I don’t hate him. He’s not ugly, and I don’t think he’s cruel. We’ve already agreed to leave each other alone.”

Emily blinked. “You talked to him about it?”

Daphne shrugged, perching on the edge of the bed. She picked up a strip of ribbon, rolling it over and over in her hands until it was a long, thin tube.

“He’ll leave me alone, and I will leave him alone. I’ve already met his son. He’s a sweet, little boy—you’ll like him.”

“You... You know who he is, don’t you?” Emily whispered, leaning forward. “The Duke of Thornbridge, that is.”

Daphne frowned. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“He was married before. To Beatrice’s older sister, Jane.”

Daphne sucked in a breath, recalling seeing Beatrice curled up on the edge of Anna’s bed, sobbing her heart out, and Anna trying her best to soothe and console her.

“I remember it vaguely,” she admitted. “But we were young when she died. We didn’t know her, did we?”

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“Not much. But there was a good deal of talk about her death, and the Duke.”

A cold shiver rolled down Daphne’s spine. “They don’t think that he?—”

“No, no,” Emily interrupted hastily. “Nothing that the Duke did. She died in childbirth, but there was talk about the Duke’s mother, who died in the same way.”

“Could be bad luck.”

“It could. Curses aren’t real, after all.”

Emily crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed beside her sister. For a long moment, they sat together in silence.

“This is my fault,” Emily said, at last. “If I’d just gone through with it?—”

“No, Emmie,” Daphne interrupted firmly. “I won’t have you blaming yourself. None of this is your fault. If anything, it’s mine, for riding off into the woods instead of doing the sensible thing and going home.” She paused, glancing sideways at her sister. “But I’m worried about you, Emily.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. What’s going to happen to you now? With... with the Duke of Clapton. He hasn’t exposed you, has he?”

Emily got up abruptly, moving over to the window. “Don’t worry about that, Daff.”

“Oh, I will worry about it,” Daphne shot back, hurrying over to stand beside her. “Is he still going to force you to marry him? Emily!”

Emily sighed. “It’s all taken care of, Daphne.”

Daphne hadn’t been expecting that. She blinked, taken aback. “What, all sorted?”

Her sister shrugged. “I spoke with him. Properly, face to face. No more letters. It’s taken care of, and I don’t want you to worry anymore.”

Daphne stared at her sister for a long moment. “Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

She sighed. “There’s something you aren’t telling me, Emily. Out with it.”

Emily moved over to the bed again, leaving Daphne to trail behind. She began unpacking, carefully smoothing out and folding her things.

“We’ll talk about it later,” she said, her gaze fixed on her clothes. “Later, when all of this is sorted out. When you are safe and happy.”

Daphne stared, baffled. Never, never had her sister kept a secret from her. They’d always shared everything, every scrap of gossip, every piece of information. Daphne had never considered hiding a thing from her sister.

Well, that’s not quite true, is it? said a snide voice at the back of her head. You didn’t tell her how the Duke of Thornbridge made you feel.

Daphne cleared her throat, realizing that Emily was not going to talk about it anymore. Could something terrible have happened between her and the Duke of

Clapton?

No, if it was something terrible, Emily would have told her. Wouldn't she?

"With two sisters as duchesses, you should be safe now, Emily," Daphne heard herself saying. "I can have fencing lessons like I've always wanted, and if the Duke bothers you, I'll challenge him to a duel."

Emily chuckled. "Do you know, I believe you would? But please, Daff, don't worry about me. Things were dealt with. I just wish... well, I just wish it could have been managed before all of this occurred. You are suffering because of me, and I can't bear it."

"I'm not suffering," Daphne admitted. "The Duke will leave me alone, and I won't be having any children, which is a relief."

Emily shot her a sharp look. "So long as you're happy, Daff."

Daphne shrugged. "I'm quite all right, I promise."

There was a moment of awkward silence, and Daphne felt a stab of misery. When had she ever felt awkward around her twin before? What was happening?

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“We should start to get ready,” Emily said quietly, after a moment. “It’ll be time for supper before we know it.”

Reluctantly, Edward opened up the proper dining room.

He’d always hated that room. It was huge, ugly, and always cold, no matter how high the fire burned. His father had insisted on the two of them taking their evening meal there every single day. The table was long and wide, and laden every day as if they were having a dinner party.

They never had dinner parties, of course. Edward would sit at one end of the table, and his father at the other, and the distance was such that no conversation was physically possible. They would have had to shout.

No doubt that was his father’s aim. When Edward got old enough to voice opinions of his own without fear of reprisal, he began taking his plate and glass down to his father’s end of the table and sitting beside him. The late Duke would always watch him approach impassively, saying nothing.

For a moment, Edward had believed that he had done it, that he was finally breaking through the walls the late Duke had put around himself.

At the next suppertime, he learned from the waiting staff that the late Duke had taken his meal in his study and intended to do that from now on.

Edward ate alone.

He had only set up the lower half of the table so that the seven of them could sit close together. He wasn't sure if this was a good idea, but he had a feeling that his bride-to-be would be the sort of person to pick up her plate and walk over to wherever she preferred to sit and set it down there.

There was no musty smell in the room, at least. Perhaps it would be better to eat here with others instead of his father, who would have only glared at him down the length of polished mahogany.

"You poor thing, Edward. How you must be suffering."

He flinched. "Clarissa. I didn't hear you coming."

He turned to face his stepmother, who was smiling at him.

"I do tend to creep around," she answered, chuckling. "Where shall I sit, then? I suppose you're sitting at the head of the table."

"Of course. Um, Clarissa? I hoped to talk to you."

His stepmother glanced up at him, her eyebrow raised. "Oh? This sounds serious."

He winced. "I... I was sharp with you earlier. In the breakfast room, when you were speaking to Miss Belmont."

I told you to mind your place, he added silently, feeling a rush of guilt. I told you that you weren't my mother. Unforgivable.

He dropped his gaze, swallowing hard. "Please forgive me, Clarissa. I spoke out of turn."

“You cannot speak out of turn in your own house,” she replied.

“Of course I can. You didn’t deserve that, and I certainly shouldn’t have spoken to you that way in front of the others. I am sorry, Clarissa.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, then broke into a wry smile.

“It’s quite all right, Edward. I could never hold a grudge against you.”

He gave a relieved smile. “I’m glad, truly. I’ll be more careful in the future.”

She nodded, gliding closer. “You know how much I always wanted a child. I always thought of you as mine, but I think perhaps I made a mess of being a mother. I tried, though. Please believe me, Edward, but I did try.”

“Raising children is hard,” he snorted. “Trust me, I’m a terrible father to Alex. Sometimes I worry that—” He broke off abruptly, shaking his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

Clarissa bit her lip. “You can talk to me about anything, you know.”

He turned away. “I know. It sounds like they’re coming. Let’s hope this goes well, eh?”

It was clear that his guests were uncomfortable. He didn’t blame them. They didn’t know him, didn’t care to know him, and perhaps they still believed that he had somehow kidnapped their precious Miss Belmont.

Miss Belmont herself had changed into a simple burgundy dress, and her twin sister wore an identical gown in grey. There was something eerie about the pair of them. They looked so alike, standing side by side with blank faces.

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But somehow, Daphne was prettier. He wasn't entirely sure how that could be, considering they looked the same.

In a flash, Edward recalled how she'd looked up at him after he kissed her, with flushed cheeks and wide eyes, her chest heaving. He remembered the powerful pull of desire he'd felt, the urge to hold her again. He'd wanted to hold her against him, slide his hands across her waist, and touch the fluttering pulse in her neck.

He'd wanted to kiss her again, more deeply this time, to taste her.

He was glad he'd controlled himself, of course. Theirs wasn't going to be this sort of marriage. Besides, who wouldn't be appalled by a beastly, clodhopping man like himself slobbering all over her? No, he had to stick to his word.

Clearing his throat, Edward shook away the thoughts and stepped forward to greet Daphne and her sister.

"You're quite the gentleman tonight," Miss Belmont said as he turned to walk away.

He paused, glancing back at her. "I'm always a gentleman."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're far too sharp to be one. But with my family, you were a perfect noble."

"Perhaps I like your family more."

Miss Belmont's sister gave a disapproving tut. He'd said the wrong thing, as usual.

Edward turned away, hoping to mask his humiliation.

They're all so... so sociable. Full of all the right graces, always knowing the right thing to say.

He'd heard of the Duke of Langdon, of course. The wild Duke tamed by love. The witty, handsome noble who could turn the charm on and off at will.

It was hard not to feel jealous.

"Shall we sit?" Edward announced to the room.

They all moved towards their chairs, but Miss Daphne Belmont paused, glancing around.

"Where is Alex? Isn't he joining us? What about Mrs. Trench?"

"This is a formal dinner," Edward responded, feeling once again as though he'd put a foot wrong. "Alex is too young to join us. It isn't the done thing."

"Perhaps not," Lady St. Maur conceded, settling in her seat. "But I'm sure none of us would object. When my girls were young, they always sat with me and my husband at the table. We liked having them there. We are all about to be family, after all."

Edward took his seat at the head of the table. He realized a moment too late that the table had been set up at the wrong end. This was the seat his father had sat in, whereas a younger Edward would sit at the opposite end.

It felt wrong, more wrong than he could imagine.

"Well, perhaps Alex will join us later," he relented. "I hope the food is to your

liking.”

That seemed to kill all conversation. The first course was served, and for a few long moments, only the sound of polite eating and drinking filled the room.

Lady St. Maur broke the silence first, clearing her throat and saying something or other about the wedding. Her daughters joined in, and Clarissa, and for a while, the conversation was light and almost pleasant.

“I imagine we can keep things simple, then, if the wedding is not going to be elaborate?” Lady St. Maur said, glancing at Edward.

“Simple, yes, but a certain standard must be achieved,” Edward answered. “I don’t want to give any rise to gossip. Make the choices that suit you and your daughter, Lady St. Maur, but I can’t have people saying that I skimmed on my own wedding. They’ll say I was angry at being caught out. I’m sure you know the sort of things people will say.”

Lady St. Maur nodded sympathetically.

“It’ll be expensive, then,” Miss Belmont remarked, reaching for her wine glass.

Clarissa shot her a disdainful look and scoffed. “Then perhaps you should have seduced a regular lord, instead of a duke.”

There was a pause after that.

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Edward's hand tightened around his fork.

"Clarissa..." he began threateningly, but Miss Belmont interrupted him.

"Forgive me, Your Grace, but there was no seduction here. Your stepson will tell you that. You must know that?—"

"I know nothing," Clarissa interrupted. "In fact, I?—"

"Enough," Edward bit out.

He'd spoken much louder than he'd intended, his voice echoing through the dining hall. It seemed to ring off the crystal glasses. Everybody had gone very still. Miss Belmont was staring at her plate. Clarissa was staring at Edward, her expression unreadable.

"Edward, I am only saying what will be said everywhere," she said, her voice shaking just a little.

He eyed her for an instant. "You cannot speak to the future Duchess of Thornbridge in this manner," he responded, at last. "Not now, not ever. Just because a piece of false gossip might be repeated does not give you the right to say it yourself. I am sorry, Clarissa, but I cannot tolerate this from anyone, not even you. You must apologize."

The silence grew heavier. The Duke and Duchess of Langdon were inspecting their soup bowls closely. Lady St. Maur looked horrified. Miss Emily Belmont appeared to

be on the brink of tears.

Edward held Clarissa's eye, willing her to do as she was told.

Come on, Clarissa. Just say that you are sorry. Please. Let's get this done with. You must know that I cannot let this slide.

Clarissa cleared her throat. "I am sorry, Edward. That was an improper thing to say."

The awful silence continued.

"Not to me," Edward said. "To Miss Belmont."

The color drained from Clarissa's cheeks. She got abruptly to her feet, the chair scraping back, making them all jump. She glanced across the table at Miss Belmont, and Edward saw the dislike in her eyes.

"I apologize, Miss Belmont."

"Think nothing of it," Miss Belmont murmured. "I'd like to be friends."

Clarissa smiled tightly. "Of course. Do excuse me."

She left the room at once, leaving silence behind her once again.

Say something, Edward urged himself. Something, anything, just to break the ice.

The Duke of Langdon cleared his throat. "This soup," he announced, "is excellent. Duke, I must have the recipe."

CHAPTER 10

Edward stood on the terrace, breathing in the cold air, trying to steady his nerves.

The morning was crisp and fresh, with a layer of frost on the ground. Not too icy, though.

Come on, man. You aren't diving off the edge of a cliff. You're spending quality time with your son. There's no need to be nervous.

His internal scolding did not seem to be working. Anxiety still fizzled in his gut. To distract himself, he strode over to where the groom stood with three horses—Edward's favorite gelding, a horse for the groom to follow behind, and a smaller, sweet-tempered mare that would bear Alex safely.

"He should be down at any moment," Edward spoke.

The groom bowed but said nothing.

And what if he doesn't come down? Mrs. Trench isn't a tyrant. She won't force him to get up and get dressed for an early morning ride if he doesn't want to. Will I be left kicking my heels on the terrace, a pathetic figure of a father?

Perhaps he can't forgive me, like I could never forgive my father.

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The doors to the terrace creaked open, and Edward flinched. He turned to see Alex, carefully dressed in warm clothes for the cold weather, standing on the step. Mrs. Trench stood behind him, neat as always.

“Go on, Alex,” she whispered, nudging him forward. “Go and join your father.”

Alex shuffled closer and smiled nervously. “Good morning, Papa.”

“Good morning, Alex. I thought it would be nice for us to go on a ride together, just you and me, to talk about some things.”

Alex eyed his father for a long moment, curious and thoughtful.

“I think it will be nice,” he said, at last. “Where will we go?”

“Just to the top of the hill and back,” Edward answered, overcome by a sudden rush of relief.

It was silly, really, to be so relieved that his own son wanted to spend time with him.

A good father wouldn't be surprised. A good father would already spend enough time with his son, rather than pretend they did not live in the same house together.

The truth was that Miss Belmont's words to him in the study had shaken him.

If an absolute stranger could see that Edward's relationship with his son was tenuous, what could the rest of the household see? Was Alex suffering? Was he unhappy?

Am I repeating the mistakes my father made? If so, how can I stop it?

It was time to mount, and Edward watched Alex climb nimbly up into his saddle first. The groom would follow them at a respectful distance, giving the two of them privacy.

Ideally, at least.

“Ready?” Edward asked, turning his horse around.

Alex nodded. “I’m ready, Papa.”

The two of them headed directly up the hill, a stony path that sloped steeper and steeper. There was another path up ahead, one that snaked through the forest, but Edward had already decided that they wouldn’t take it. It was too narrow and rough. Alex was only eight, after all.

Edward had imagined that Alex would chatter about everything and nothing, like he had when he was younger, and Edward would just listen benevolently.

Easy.

But Alex stayed quiet, and the silence stretched out between them.

Don’t be a coward, Edward told himself angrily.

He cleared his throat and spoke. “So, then, Alex. How are you feeling?”

Alex blinked up at him. “Feeling? About what?”

Edward shrugged. “About what happened yesterday. About all of it.”

“Oh, I see.” Alex paused, considering. “Well, I wish I could have joined you for supper.”

“Yes, that was my fault. I thought it wasn’t proper for children to sit at the table, but I guess other people like informal meals, too. You’re going to join us in the future, I promise.”

Alex smiled up at his father. “I’m glad, Papa. And I like Miss Belmont. I like her very much.”

Edward cleared his throat again. “So... you don’t mind my getting married again? It can be a difficult thing for a young boy to accept, I’ve heard. I know Mrs. Trench has explained all of this to you, but it might take time to?”

“I’m glad you’re marrying Miss Belmont,” Alex interrupted. “I like her, and I think she’ll make an excellent new mama. Do...” He paused uncertainly, glancing up at Edward. “Do you think she’s happy here? Would she have been happier going back to London?”

“I imagine she would have preferred to go back to London,” Edward snorted. “But she was already ruined before she left. Not that she’s a bad woman, of course,” he added hastily, lest his son get any uncomfortable ideas that he might repeat in public. “But she made some mistakes. It’s easy enough to make mistakes, you know.”

Alex seemed to accept this.

Edward privately congratulated himself on navigating a tricky conversation so easily. He glanced down at his son, who was sitting like a seasoned, tiny rider in the saddle, his back straight and his eyes fixed on the road ahead. A wave of affection washed over Edward, so intense that he had to close his eyes for a moment.

My son. My little boy. I'm doing my best with our boy, Jane. Maybe my best isn't good enough, but I'm trying. I swear to you, I'm trying. I wonder what you see from up there, in Heaven? Do you think I've tried hard enough? Are there mistakes I've made that can't be undone, or foolish choices the consequences of which will reverberate for years?

Could I have tried harder? Could I have done better?

Is it too late to fix it?

"Papa," Alex said, sitting up a little straighter, "can we take the path through the forest?"

Blinking, jerked out of his reverie, Edward glanced down the path in question. They'd reached the crossroads, now. The easy path lay ahead, wide and open, the sun streaming down on flat fields and a smooth road. The easy path ended soon, though. He knew that at the top of the hill, the path ended in a circular, flat clearing, where they could admire the view and then head back down the way they'd come.

The forest path, however, was something else entirely. It was narrower and darker,

hung with encroaching branches and undergrowth flopping over the ground, which was broken by stones and raised tree roots. It could be tricky.

He glanced down at Alex, who was looking hopefully up at him.

Edward let out a slow sigh. “All right. We can go that way. Just go carefully, won’t you?”

Alex beamed. “I’ll be careful, Papa! It looks like it’s more fun, though, doesn’t it? Mrs. Trench said that the less traveled road was always the best one to take.”

“Mrs. Trench has probably never trekked through a mountain pass, then,” Edward mumbled, but not loud enough for Alex to hear.

They took the forest path. Almost immediately, it became cooler and darker, the air full of birdsong and mysterious rustling in the undergrowth. A smell of petrichor hung in the air, fresh and sweet.

“Are you looking forward to the wedding, then?” Edward asked, after a few moments of silence.

“I don’t know. Are they nice?”

Edward was a little taken aback by this. “Oh. Well, I suppose you haven’t been to a wedding before. I wouldn’t say they are nice. They’re crowded and busy, and the poor newlyweds don’t even have time to smile at each other. I’ve always felt that weddings are for the guests rather than the couple who are celebrating their wedding. But ours will be different. It will be smaller and quieter, and we can celebrate properly.”

Alex gave him a smile, his face lit up by childish excitement. “Will there be cake?”

Edward bit back a smile.

At last, he looks like a proper eight-year-old, not a serious grown man stuck in a child's body.

"Of course, there'll be cake," he answered. "Lots of it, too. You can eat as much as you want and be sick afterward."

Alex pulled a face. "I think I will eat a lot, but not enough to be sick. Do you think Miss Belmont likes cake?"

"I would be surprised if she didn't. Everybody likes cake."

"Not Grandmother. She hates sweet things. She told me so."

Edward pursed his lips. "Well, we can't all be alike, can we?"

Alex considered this. "No, I suppose we can't."

Glancing over his shoulder, Edward confirmed that the groom was a good way back, well out of earshot.

Clearing his throat, he urged his horse a little closer to Alex's. The path was so narrow, so they were forced to ride single file, and Alex had ended up leading the way. At least thisway, Edward could keep an eye on him without having to keep twisting around.

"I had hoped to talk to you about something important, Alex."

The boy twisted around in the saddle. "Am I in trouble, Papa?"

“Trouble? No. We don’t talk a lot, you and I, do we? That’s a pity.”

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Alex blinked up at his father, his eyes large and guileless. “It is a pity.”

“Ahem. Well, I wanted to talk to you about the night Miss Belmont arrived. You had... You had run away, hadn’t you? When you met her.”

Alex twisted around in his saddle again, facing forward. “Yes, I had run away. But you mustn’t blame Mrs. Trench. She?—”

“I don’t blame Mrs. Trench. I don’t blame you, either, Alex. I... I just want to know why you ran away. I thought by now you might be ready to tell me.”

Edward forced himself to wait.

The silence stretched out, begging to be filled with words. He eyed his son’s narrow back, hunched over the saddle now.

“You know why, Papa,” Alex said, at last.

“No, I don’t. If I knew, I wouldn’t ask.”

“You never ask about things you know about,” Alex muttered, but before Edward could ask him what he meant, the boy was talking again. “I... I thought I would go to London.”

He blinked. “London? Why London? You should know that there’s nothing for you there. Nothing for us. Your mother’s dying wish was that I take you away from there.”

Alex hung his head. “But she never said that I couldn’t go back, did she?”

“What do you want to do in London, Alex? Where would you go?”

He drew in a breath. “I’d see Aunt Beatrice, my mother’s sister. And my grandparents. I’ve never seen them.”

Edward said nothing for a long moment, guilt rushing in.

Beatrice had always been at their house, to begin with. Jane adored her sister, and they did everything together. He’d liked Beatrice. She was talkative and confident and clever, and only seemed to laugh at his brusqueness.

But once Jane was gone, things changed. When he retired to the country with baby Alex, he did not invite Beatrice to come. She sent him letters, of course, as did Jane’s parents, but he rarely responded. He dutifully declined all invitations to visit and ignored hints that they would like to visit him. The letters gradually dwindled.

He had heard that Beatrice was married and was said to be very happy. In the few letters she wrote to him now, she always asked about her nephew, eager for any news about him.

“I’m sorry that you’ve never met your aunt,” Edward heard himself say, his voice cracking. “Perhaps one day, you will.”

“Perhaps,” Alex responded flatly.

Instantly, Edward realized that his son did not believe him.

How many promises have I broken to make him distrust me so much?

In a flash, he was back in his study, facing an angry Miss Belmont.

“He loves you dearly, and you didn’t even come to see him tonight, although you’d promised that you would.”

He’d forgotten about the promise he’d made to Alex, so easily spoken, that he’d come up and see him before bed. What had distracted him? Why hadn’t he gone up?

Abruptly, Alex sat up a little straight, spurring his horse forward. For one awful moment, Edward thought his son was trying to run away again, but no, he was just hurrying forward to a large clearing. Their road was blocked by a fallen tree, the log standing at waist height across the path.

“We could jump over it, Papa,” Alex said, his eyes shining. “I’ve been practicing my jumps during my riding lessons. I bet that Bess and I could do it.”

Edward swallowed reflexively. He knew that he and his gelding could manage it, and the mare Alex was riding had made larger jumps before. But Alex was too small, too inexperienced. In a flash, he was standing over his son’s crumpled body in the undergrowth, his neck broken, his eyes blank and lifeless.

He choked.

“No, Alex. We’ll turn back.”

Alex’s face fell. “I can do it, Papa. Ask the groom—I’ve done jumps that high before.”

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“Well, you should not. It’s too much for you. Come on, we’re going back.”

“It’s because I’m suffocating,” Alex burst out.

Edward paused, half turning his horse around. “What?”

Alex flushed, but he tilted up his chin and met his father’s eyes. “You don’t want me here. You never did. Everybody knows it, and I know it too. I feel like I’m suffocating—you won’t let me do anything, or go anywhere, or even... even leave the house, even with Mrs. Trench. Nothing ever changes, and I can’t breathe, Papa.”

There was a long silence after that. Alex’s gaze shifted away, his mouth screwing up as if he were going to cry.

Edward moved his horse a little closer and reached out, awkwardly patting Alex on the shoulder.

“I’m... I’m sorry you feel like that, my boy. It’s not intentional. As to visiting your aunt and grandparents, you can’t possibly go now. Not while this scandal is still fresh. People in London can be... cruel. But once all of the gossip has died down, we might go to visit. And we can invite them here for the wedding. Your aunt Beatrice is a close friend of Miss Belmont’s older sister. Would you like that? To have them here?”

Alex sniffed and managed a wobbly smile. “I would like that, Papa.”

Edward let out a shaky sigh of relief. He felt as though he’d maneuvered that

situation very well, or as well as could be expected from a man who had no idea what to do with a child.

Perhaps my marrying Miss Belmont is a good idea. Perhaps Alex needs a mother.

Perhaps I need a woman who'll look me in the eye and tell me the truth, even if it's difficult.

Clearing his throat again, he removed his hand from Alex's shoulder. Perhaps it would have been a good idea to offer a hug, but that would be too awkward, on account of them both being in the saddle. Besides, Edward did not like hugs and embraces. His father had never done such a thing, not even once.

"We can talk about the wedding if you like," Edward heard himself say. "I'm sure Miss Belmont would love to hear your suggestions for the guest list."

Guest list? My simple, quiet wedding isn't going to happen, I'm afraid.

"I will," Alex said, brightening. "And perhaps, after the wedding, I'll get a new brother or sister. Do you think I will, Papa?"

Edward gulped audibly. "We'll see."

CHAPTER 11

They had gone to bed early that day, so Daphne was not tired at all. She lay awake, staring up at the ceiling above her bed.

She wished she and Emily were sharing a room. They'd always shared one at home, even when there was space for them to have their own rooms. As it was, Emily was sleeping in the next room, and Daphne didn't feel right going in to wake her.

A chasm had opened up between them since the ruined wedding. It was clear that Emily was hiding something from her sister regarding the Duke of Clapton. Besides, while nobody had said anything, it was clear that the family all blamed Daphne for this whole business. If she'd been more sensible, none of this would have happened. Emily would have had to marry the Duke of Clapton, of course. Wasn't that the lesser of two evils?

Daphne closed her eyes.

I really have ruined everything, haven't I? For myself, and for the Duke of Thornbridge. I don't believe he's a bad man. He was happy enough as a widower. What will Beatrice say when she learns I've married her brother-in-law?

Oh, and now she had a headache. Wonderful.

Twisting around to look at the clock, Daphne saw that it was just past midnight. The house was quiet, and outside was dark and icy.

She got up and threw a robe around her shoulders.

Dinner had been a tense affair, with nobody saying much of anything to anyone. The family had stuck to their parlor, and nobody had seen the Duke except during supper. Alex had joined them for supper, along with Mrs. Trench, and seemed happy enough, swinging his legs and chattering. Anna and Octavia had fussed over him and even wrung a half-smile out of the Duke.

The Duke hadn't spoken to Daphne at all. When he had to address her, he kept his gaze on his plate and never once glanced her way.

Of course, there'd been no discussion about the kiss. Of course not. Daphne had briefly considered bringing it up but then quickly decided against it. If the Duke

wanted to pretend that nothing had happened, it would be better to go along with it, surely?

Her stomach growled—a reminder that she hadn't eaten much during supper. Tying the robe around her waist, Daphne snatched up a candle and slipped out into the hallway.

It was dark, with only the occasional candle set at intervals. It was cold too, and she wished she hadn't stepped out in her bare feet.

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I won't be long. I'll collect some food and something to drink, then go back to my room. After that, I suppose I'll have to try and sleep again. Alex promised me a grand tour tomorrow, and I have the feeling that he wakes up early.

She remembered her way well enough, creeping down icy stone steps and into the depths of the house. A candle flickered in the kitchen, casting long, jagged shadows over the stone flags.

Odd that they left the candle out like that.

The kitchen was empty, of course. It was a long, wide space with a low ceiling, smelling deliciously of herbs and cooked meat and roasted vegetables. Gleaming copper pots hung on the walls, and embers still glowed in a vast hearth. A large wooden table, scrubbed clean, sat in the middle of the room, cleared of everything except the candle and a chipped, old mug. Half a dozen gaping, dark doorways led to other servants' hallways and rooms, part of a maze that Daphne hadn't even begun to decipher.

Something shuffled in the darkness, and she froze, her heart thumping suddenly.

How could I have been so stupid, wandering around an unfamiliar house in the dark? What if it's a robber? I could scream my heart out down here and nobody would ever hear.

A tall, broad-shouldered figure appeared in one doorway, and Daphne's breath caught in her throat.

“Miss Belmont?”

Her shoulders sagged with relief. “Your Grace? Is that you? What on earth are you doing down here?”

The figure stepped forward, and she saw that it was indeed the Duke. He was dressed for bed, in plain breeches and a loose linen shirt, unlaced at the neck and displaying a deep V at his chest, like before.

She cleared her throat and dragged her gaze up to meet his eyes.

He was frowning at her, holding a cloth bag in one hand and a package in the other.

“What am I doing here?” he repeated. “This is my kitchen, you know. I think a better question is, what are you doing here?”

She bit her lip. “I didn’t eat much at dinner. I was hungry, so I thought I’d come down and get something to eat without disturbing anyone.” Her gaze dropped to the packages in his hands. “I guess you thought the same.”

There was a long pause, broken only by the ticking of a clock somewhere. The kitchen was cold, and a draft swirled around Daphne’s bare ankles. She was suddenly all too aware that she was in her nightgown, with only a thin robe over it, and barefoot. It wasn’t the proper attire to greet anyone in, let alone a man. The material of her gown suddenly felt far too thin, and goosebumps rose over her skin.

“I’m sure we won’t get in each other’s way,” the Duke said, making her flinch.

“What... What are you making?” Daphne managed, trying to compose herself. She was shivering, and it couldn’t be just because of the cold.

He wasn't looking at her now, having turned around to unhook a pan from the wall.

"Chocolate," he responded shortly. "Want some?"

"Um, yes, please."

He didn't respond, bustling about the kitchen and getting things ready. Soon enough, the sweet smell of chocolate filled the air, and Daphne's stomach rumbled again. She noticed that he hadn't touched the other package, however.

While the Duke stood at the stove, stirring the bubbling mixture, she inched over to the package, poking it experimentally. It was untied, and she pulled back a linen flap to see the contents.

"Your Grace, what's in?—"

He turned around and paled. "No, don't open..."

They both stared down at the contents of the package.

"Marzipan fruits," she said, surprised. "I didn't know you had a sweet tooth, Your Grace."

He flushed, snatching up the package. "Everybody has their weaknesses. Marzipan is delicious, by the way."

"You'll get no argument from me. Why eat them in secret, though? My father used to love sugared plums, and he always had a few of them in a little bowl on his desk in his study, so he could eat them whenever he wanted."

The chocolate was ready. The Duke carefully poured two generous mugfuls. Steam

billowed in the cold air.

“I can’t eat as many as I would like in front of Alex,” he responded brusquely.

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Daphne waited for a response, and when none was forthcoming, she was obliged to ask a follow-up question.

“And why not?”

He sighed. “Alex loves marzipan too. I don’t mind him eating them, of course, but he’s like me—he doesn’t know when to stop when it comes to sweet things. He fills up on them, and won’t eat his dinner. He eats until he’s ill—the sugar is bad for him, and then I feel so guilty. So, I pretended to stop buying marzipan and let him have a few on special occasions. It feels like a mature, grown-up thing to do, don’t you think?”

She chuckled. “It is mature. I like how you can understand that your son shouldn’t eat too much marzipan, but you don’t apply the same rule to yourself.”

He arched an eyebrow. “That’s one of the benefits of being a duke, I suppose. Here’s your chocolate.”

She reached over, helping herself to a marzipan. “Thanks. I look forward to being a duchess, and having my own personal stash of marzipan, too.”

The Duke winced. “Don’t think badly of me.”

“I won’t.”

He paused, eyeing her. “If we’re to be married, we should probably call each other something other than Miss Belmont and Your Grace.”

Daphne tilted her head. “That’s surprisingly friendly of you. I thought you only behaved like a gentleman to other people.”

He pursed his lips, not meeting her eyes. “You are every vexatious, Madam.”

“I take pride in it. My name is Daphne, as you already know. You can call me that if you like. My sister calls me Daff.”

She took a sip of her chocolate, still hot but rich and sweet and delicious. It was well-made chocolate. Daphne thought wryly of her father, who couldn’t even boil water, let alone cook anything or make chocolate.

“My name is Edward,” the Duke said, after a long pause. “You can call me… Well, just call me Edward, I suppose.”

“You don’t have a nickname? Edward lends itself to so many nicknames. Eddie or Ed, or even Teddy.”

The Duke—Edward—pressed his lips together, and she sensed that she’d said the wrong thing, or perhaps touched a nerve.

“No, I’ve never had a nickname. I’m happy with Edward.”

She cleared her throat. “Edward it is, then. I hope we’ll be friends. There’s no sense in being miserable, is there?”

On impulse, she held out her hand for him to shake. He hesitated, eyeing her hand, and for a moment, she thought he was going to turn his back.

He didn’t. He took her hand, almost abruptly, enclosing it in his larger, rougher one, his long fingers wrapping over her knuckles.

“Agreed,” he answered shortly. “We’ll be friends. If we can. Want another marzipan?”

She smiled. “Yes, please. You know, I never would have thought that a cursed duke would be so—” She broke off, suddenly afraid she’d gone too far.

Edward only smiled wryly. “So... what?”

She flushed. “Human.”

He nodded, saying nothing.

Really, there was nothing to keep them in the kitchen now. Edward had his chocolate and his marzipan. He should have taken his treats and left Daphne to seek out some food of her own. He made no move to leave, though. Staying where he was, his fingers curled around the steaming mug of chocolate, Edward sipped his drink, leaning back against the table.

“I didn’t mean to say that, by the way,” Daphne burst out. “About you being cursed. It’s just a silly thing that the scandal sheet said. I don’t know why I... I don’t know why I said it. It’s stupid.”

Edward eyed her over the rim of his mug. “You don’t believe it, then?” he asked. “That I’m cursed?”

She scoffed. “Believe it? Of course not. People don’t get cursed. It’s all just stories, isn’t it? Stories and bad luck.”

“Then I’ve been unlucky, indeed. You might as well know, Daphne, that the reason I’m said to be cursed is because no woman in my life survives.”

Daphne flinched, horrified. “What? That’s ridiculous!”

He shrugged. “My mother died giving birth to me, and then my wife died giving birth to our son. I’m cursed. It’s well talked about, and many people believe it.”

“That’s just a coincidence. It’s just bad luck. And what about Lady Clarissa? Your stepmother? She’s not dead. You can’t possibly believe this nonsense.”

He smiled wryly. “I didn’t say that I believed it. I said that other people believe it. In this world, that’s all that matters—what people believe.”

“That can’t be true.”

He sipped his chocolate. It must have still been too hot to drink, but he gulped it down as if hurrying to get the drink over with.

“It matters what people believe,” he said. “If enough people believe a thing, it becomes true, more or less. It’s silly, but it’s true. It’s naive to believe otherwise.”

She shook her head. “No. We have to prove them wrong.”

He raised an eyebrow. “We?”

“Well, me, then. I’ll live, and that will prove that this curse is nonsense. There’s no chance of me dying in childbirth, as you made it pretty clear that we wouldn’t be having any children ourselves.”

She watched him carefully as she made that point.

Daphne wasn't entirely sure what she wanted to see. Regret, perhaps, at having so carelessly told her that they wouldn't share a bed, not even once? Desire?

No, don't be stupid. If he did desire you, you wouldn't have the first idea what to do about it. You'd just stand there, mouth open like a fish, looking silly.

It didn't matter, because Edward's face gave nothing away.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he said, at last. "Don't concern yourself with proving anybody wrong or worrying about my reputation. It's not yours to worry about."

"But it will be," she pressed, leaning forward. "Don't you see? We'll be married. I'll be the Duchess, you'll be the Duke."

"Oh, is that how it works? How fascinating."

"Don't try and make light of it. Of course, I'll be concerned with your reputation, and Alex's, just like you'll be concerned with mine. Once we're married," Daphne continued, warming up to her subject, "we'll show Society who we really are. Who you really are. We'll host parties, go to balls, and?—"

Without warning, he dived forward, grabbing her wrist. He didn't squeeze it but held it firmly enough that she could not pull away.

"No," he said, his voice low and insistent. "Listen to me now, Daphne. I thought I was clear enough before. When we are married, we'll live our own lives. I agreed to be friends because I don't want to make your life or mine unpleasant, but this is not a proper marriage. We'll keep our distance from each other, and go on as we have. This is how it must be. It's how I want it to be."

She stared up at him, her heart pounding. His fingers were cool around her wrist, tingles flying up and down her arms. She couldn't make sense of the way her body seemed to react to the man, not when he was so infuriating most times.

"You're nice to look at, but you drive me to distraction every time you open your mouth, Edward."

It took Daphne half a minute to realize, in horror, that she'd said it out loud.

Edward blinked, clearly taken aback. They were entirely too close, his nose only a few inches away from hers.

"Then I'll close it again, after I've finished saying what needs to be said," he ground out. "Let me be blunt, Daphne. I don't intend to change my lifestyle, not for you or anyone. I live a quiet life. No parties, no Society. Just a simple life, and my work. That's all I want. I won't change that. You can do as you like, and once a few years have gone by, you can move somewhere else if you like. For now, though, do not try to change me. I am who I am, and nobody will make me do anything I don't wish to do. Not you, not anyone."

She tilted up her chin. The happiness and laughter had gone out of the room in an instant like air sucked away from a raging fire.

"Not anyone? Not even your own son?"

She'd hit a nerve, then.

Edward flinched back, impulsively releasing her wrist. She backed away, suddenly keen to put distance between them. Anything to calm her racing heart and pounding pulse. Anything to reduce the prickling sensation in her skin, the infuriating tug of desire in her gut.

Why can't I be attracted to a nice, charming, soft-spoken gentleman? Why does it have to be him?

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No answers, of course, were forthcoming. Edward stared at her for a long moment, the air crackling between them.

“I don’t mean to offend you,” he said, at last. “But stay out of my business, Daphne. Especially between me and my son. And I’ll tell you once more that I won’t change my life, not for you. I can’t.”

He can’t? What does that mean?

Daphne held his gaze for a long moment, waiting for him to say something more, but there was nothing. He only stared back at her, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

She broke into a wide, insincere smile. “Very well, Your Grace.”

Before he could react, she swept down into a deep curtsy, spreading out wide, imaginary skirts, hem brushing the gritty kitchen floor. She rose again, turned on her heel, and strode out, leaving her chocolate cooling on the kitchen table behind her.

CHAPTER 12

“Are you ready, Miss Belmont? I’ve got a great deal to show you.”

Alex was in a fine, chirpy mood. Daphne, who had slept badly, was not. The little sleep she’d gotten had been haunted by dreams of Edward leaning close to her, his eyes flat and blank as he explained to her that his life would not change one iota after his marriage and that he did not want it to change.

The implication, of course, being that he did not care about her.

What did you expect, you fool? That's what this marriage is going to be. A friendship at best, at worst, devoid of all care or emotion. He's only telling you the truth, stripped of any airy-fairy nonsense.

The truth it may be, but it was still hard to swallow.

Still, it's better to realize what I'm getting into now, rather than childishly imagining that he'd turn into a handsome prince after we were married.

"Miss Belmont? Are you listening?"

She jolted, waking up from her reverie, and glanced down at Alex, who was pouting up at her.

"I'm sorry, Alex, I'm just a little tired. So, where shall we start this tour?"

Already, preparations were being made for the wedding. Only that morning, Octavia, Anna, and Emily had gone to town to buy material for Daphne's wedding dress. Daphne, of course, could not join them. She was under house arrest, more or less, until the wedding happened.

That was annoying.

Theo was wandering about the house somewhere—or perhaps he'd gone out, as he didn't generally bother to explain his movements to Daphne—and Lady Clarissa was around somewhere. She hadn't spoken to Daphne, or anyone, since that fateful dinner when the Duke had scolded her and made her apologize.

All in all, it looked set to be a boring day. Daphne had idled away the time while

Alex did his morning lessons, and now it was at least mid-afternoon, and the day had slipped away while she wasn't looking.

"I was wondering, Miss Belmont, if I could leave Master Alexander and yourself to take the tour yourselves?" Mrs. Trench asked. She was pale and heavy-eyed, and Daphne suspected it was the beginnings of a megrim. "I'm not feeling well. If I can lie down for an hour, then I'm sure..."

"Of course," Daphne said at once, smiling. "Alex and I will entertain ourselves, won't we?"

Mrs. Trench smiled in relief. "Thank you, Miss Belmont. I shall meet you both in the breakfast room for refreshments. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Daphne and Alex chorused.

A house tour conducted by a small boy was a good deal more interesting than Daphne had imagined. Alex did seem to have an impressive knowledge of the history of the house, but he mostly ignored the facts for more interesting bits of information.

"That corner is where I threw up a few years ago after Christmas dinner. I ate too many marzipans. Papa was not pleased. Oh, and you can't see it, but there's a hole in the rug where Papa knocked over a candle and it set fire to the carpet. It was quite a commotion. Ooh, and this hallway was said to be haunted. All the maids said that they felt a nasty, cold presence here, but it turned out to be a mousehole in the walls that let in a draft. And here..."

Daphne found that she was enjoying herself. Alex was a likable, little boy, precociously clever but not spoiled. They skipped through room after room, seemingly at random, until they finally stopped in front of a tall, brass-studded door with a key hanging on a hook high beside it.

“This is the gallery,” Alex said, suddenly hesitant. “I don’t go in here very often, but it has lots of pictures. It’s kept locked, but I can never reach the key.”

He shot her a quick, unreadable look, and Daphne smiled back at him.

“I’ll unlock the door, don’t you worry.”

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She unhooked the key and pushed open the heavy door. A rush of cold air hit them, and Alex went skipping ahead.

The gallery was darker than Daphne had imagined, on account of most of the curtains being closed. She wondered if that was to stop the paintings from being damaged by the sun.

“Come look at this one!” Alex called from the bottom of the hall. “This one is my mother!”

Her throat tightened. The hallway suddenly seemed very long and empty, her footsteps echoing. Alex smiled at her, patient as she approached.

At last, Daphne was there, and there was nothing to do but turn and look up at Alex’s mother, and Edward’s first wife.

There was a brass plaque beneath the painting: Lady Jane Fitzgerald (nee Haversham), Duchess of Thornbridge.

The woman in the picture did not look much like Beatrice. There were some similarities—the coppery hair, the soft, pretty eyes—but not much else. The late Duchess had been petite, judging by the painting, with a long, dainty neck and delicate arms and hands. She wore a resplendent blue gown—velvet, by the looks of it—and diamonds glittered around her throat, on her fingers, and on her ears. She was remarkably pretty, and she was smiling in the portrait.

Daphne swallowed. “She’s beautiful.”

“She was,” Alex agreed with a sigh. “Everybody says so. And she was very kind and nice. Peter Tinn, the steward, knew her and said that everybody who met her loved her. She could get Papa to do anything. He’d go to balls and parties with her, and they even invited people here. They used to go to London together, although she didn’t much like London. She liked the countryside.”

“I see.”

Daphne’s neck was beginning to ache, looking up at the huge portrait. She could see traces of old black lace around the edges of the portrait. It had clearly been swathed in a veil at one point, no doubt as part of a mourning ceremony.

“Your Papa must have loved her very much.”

“I suppose so,” Alex conceded. “I wish I could have known her. Do you think she would have liked me?”

Daphne glanced sharply down at him. “Liked you? Alex, she was your mother. She would have loved you more than anything in the world.”

Alex did not seem pleased by this. He scuffed the toe of his shoe along the floor.

“Liking and loving somebody are different things, I think,” he mumbled. “Papa loves me, or so he says, but I don’t think he likes me very much.”

Daphne’s chest clenched. She opened her mouth to say something—she wasn’t entirely sure what—but was interrupted by a bang at the other end of the hallway. They both spun around to see Edward marching towards them, his face set and angry. His footsteps echoed, and a bad mood rolled off him like mist.

“What are you doing in here?” he barked before he’d even gotten halfway down the

hall.

Daphne put herself between Alex, who had shrunk back, and his father.

“Alex is giving me a tour of the house,” she shot back. “Why are you so angry about it?”

Edward stopped a few paces away from them. “This room is forbidden. Alex is not allowed in here, not ever. That’s why the door is kept locked. That is a rule. I’m surprised Mrs. Trench didn’t tell you. Where is she?”

“She’s ill,” Daphne responded. “And I didn’t know this room was off-limits.”

“I didn’t tell her, Papa,” Alex whispered, clutching at Daphne’s hand. “I just wanted to see inside. I wanted to show her Mama’s picture.”

Edward’s gaze flicked up to the portrait, who was smiling benignly down at them.

“Right. Well. You’ve seen it, so out you go. Go up to the schoolroom now, Alex. The tour is over.”

“But, Papa?—”

“Now, Alex!”

Alex’s face fell. He shuffled past Daphne and set off down the hallway, his head down. Daphne made to follow him, but Edward held out his hand, stopping her.

She glanced up at him, keeping her expression smooth. “What do you want?”

“I want you not to contradict the rules I’ve made for my son,” Edward responded

coldly. “I want you to promise that you won’t.”

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“I did not contradict you. I didn’t know! And why can’t he come in here? It’s just a gallery.”

Edward took a step closer. Daphne did not step back. She held his gaze defiantly.

She had expected anger, bluster, and perhaps a little shouting. She hadn’t expected him to sigh.

“He shouldn’t come in here,” he said in resignation, “because I’ve asked for it to be so. You can understand that, can’t you? A simple rule, easy enough to follow. It’s bad enough that my son seems to prefer your company to mine.”

She clenched her jaw. “That’s because his father avoids him and gives one-word answers.”

“I think that’s an exaggeration.”

She said nothing, holding his gaze. “Can I go, then?”

He stepped aside, holding out his hand. “You’re free to go wherever and whenever you like, Daphne. You aren’t a prisoner.”

“So then why do I feel like one?” she snapped.

Not waiting for a response, Daphne strode past him and hurried down the hallway. She half expected to hear him stomping after her, but there was nothing. He let her go. When she paused at the end of the hall, unable to resist turning around, she found

him looking at her, a small figure in a large gallery.

Tingles ran down her spine, and she resolutely turned around.

Edward's head was pounding.

You're a fool. You've estranged your son, and now your wife-to-be can't stand you. It's a miracle, really, how you manage to turn everybody against you.

Last night had been a disaster. And it had all been going so well, too. They'd reached an almost comfortable accord.

And then he'd ruined it, speaking without thinking again.

It's for the best, though. Curse or not, I'm not fit to be a husband. Our marriage is just a piece of bad luck. She needs to see that.

He turned to go but found himself glancing up at Jane's portrait instead. She stared down, benevolent and so very unaccusing.

"Don't look at me like that," he said aloud. "I'm doing my best. The license has arrived, and the wedding is set for tomorrow. I'll leave it to her mother to tell her that. It feels like I'm bringing news of the plague or something. Alex likes her, though. I think you'd like her if you met her."

Jane, of course, said nothing.

Sighing, Edward turned to leave. Tapping footsteps approached, and he flinched, pausing.

For one mad moment, he thought it might be Daphne, come to throw herself

dramatically into his arms and do something ridiculous, like claiming that she loved him. Why she would do that, he did not know.

It wasn't Daphne. It was Peter Tinn.

"Your Grace," he puffed, red-faced. "There's... there's another pair of guests."

Edward blinked, frowning. "What? Guests? Who is it?"

Peter breathed out slowly. "It's... Well, it's the Duke and Duchess of Blackwood, Your Grace."

Edward went very still. He could almost feel Jane's painted eyes boring into him.

"Wait. Beatrice is here?"

She hadn't changed. Edward established that as soon as he saw her. She and her husband—tall, dark-haired, green-eyed, and with a reputation for having eyes and ears everywhere—were lounging in one of the parlors, talking in low voices.

Edward paused at the door, nerves suddenly eating him up.

Come on, man. Don't be a coward.

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Breathing out slowly, he stepped inside.

The Duke and Duchess both turned to look at him.

Beatrice rose to her feet.

“Edward,” she said, her voice soft and a little wobbly. “I... We... That is, I just came on account of everything. We came post-haste as soon as we heard. The Belmonts are close friends of ours, and I’ve known Daphne and Emily since they were little girls. I thought of writing to you, but we can travel just as fast as a letter. And anyway, I thought you might say no,” she added.

Edward smiled despite himself. “Well, you’re both welcome here, of course. Rooms are being prepared.”

“Are we welcome here?” the Duke of Blackwood spoke up. “Because Beatrice didn’t think that we were. It seems that since your late Duchess’s demise, you all but vanished from Society. We had no idea what might await us here.”

“Stephen, hush,” Beatrice scolded, shooting her husband a glare.

She was with child, Edward noticed, her belly pushing out the front of her gown. Almost subconsciously, her hand hovered over her stomach protectively.

Edward swallowed hard. “Congratulations, by the way. On the marriage. On the...” He paused, gesturing towards Beatrice’s belly.

He met her gaze and knew that she was thinking the same thing—Jane’s screams, echoing through the house. Her pale face, her eyes closed, the bed soaked with blood.

Beatrice lifted her chin. “I won’t die, Edward. I won’t.”

“I hope you don’t. I’ll pray for it,” he murmured, although he couldn’t remember the last time he’d prayed for anything.

“You didn’t come to the wedding,” Stephen remarked, lifting one well-polished Hessian and admiring its shine. “We invited you. Beatrice hoped you’d come.”

“Never mind that now,” Beatrice said, shooting him another glare. He flashed her a mischievous smile. “Edward, I hope you’re glad to see us because I’m glad to see you. It’s been too long.”

Edward swallowed hard, a lump forming in his throat. “Yes, I suppose it has. But you’re here now. I imagine you’ve heard about... about everything.”

“About the scandal? Yes, we have, along with the whole of the country,” Stephen said, yawning and stretching like a cat. “I’d congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials, but I don’t think they’d be well received.”

Beatrice sighed, rolling her eyes. “I am sorry about him, Edward. You’ll have to be forgiving because I’m unfortunately very fond of him.”

“I’ll try not to harm him.”

“Good. Now that we’re here, I was hoping...” She hesitated, fidgeting with the cuffs of her sleeves. “I thought perhaps... Well, I want to meet him. My nephew. Alexander.”

Edward nodded. "I thought you might. I sent for him before I came here. He should be here at any moment."

Beatrice's eyes widened, and she sucked in a breath.

On cue, footsteps and a high, childish voice sounded outside, and she reflexively began to fidget with her clothes, smoothing out her hair as if an eight-year-old boy was going to notice.

The Duke of Blackwood was on his feet in an instant, standing beside his wife. He smiled down at her, winking.

"Don't worry, love. Everything will be fine, I promise," he murmured, barely loud enough for Edward to hear.

Beatrice smiled up at him affectionately, and he kissed her forehead.

Feeling as though he were witnessing a private moment, Edward turned away.

The door opened. One of the maids stepped inside, hand in hand with Alex.

Alex paused, obviously disconcerted to see strangers standing in the room, and blinked around at them. Nobody spoke for a long minute.

Edward nodded at the maid, dismissing her.

Alex glanced up at his father. "Papa? What is it? Who are these people?"

Edward crouched down beside his son.

I wish I had time to prepare for this.

“Alex, you won’t know this woman,” he began hesitantly. “But this is the Duchess of Blackwood. She is your mother’s sister. Alex, this is your aunt Beatrice.”

Beatrice stepped forward, staring down at Alex.

“He looks so much like her,” she breathed.

Alex nervously lifted his little hand to his face. “Do I? Do I look like Mama?”

Beatrice carefully knelt down before the boy, supported by her husband.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Alex,” she said solemnly, holding out her hand. “I was there when you were born.”

Alex’s eyes widened, and he took his aunt’s hand.

Edward bit his lip, getting to his feet. It was a sweet moment, and he almost felt that?—

He froze as a dark figure in a white, flimsy gown flitted past the window, swathed in twilight.

Surely that wasn’t...

It is her. Of course, it's her. The wretched girl is trying to escape.

"Do excuse me," he said smoothly and glided out of the room.

CHAPTER 13

It was too much. It was all too much. What was she meant to do? Stay inside, struggling to breathe and fighting down panic?

No, that couldn't happen. Daphne had spent time pacing up and down in her room. Something was happening, judging by the scurrying of the servants around the upper floors, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

It was getting dark outside, making the feeling of being shut-in even worse.

I can't bear it.

Throwing on an old white nightgown, little more than a chemise, Daphne pulled on a long coat to cover it and a pair of sturdy boots. She crept down and slid out through the unlocked French doors at the side of the house, and fled into the night.

She knew exactly where she was going. She'd seen it from her window—the glimmer of a pool, set deep among the trees. She could almost feel the cool water already, like silk on her skin, refreshing. Like being reborn.

Daphne breathed out in relief when the path led her to open grass and into the forest. The air was cool, and dark green undergrowth crowded around her. It was better than that large, stiff house, where nobody said what they thought and nobody was ever happy.

She burst out of the trees, and there she was, on the shore of the pool. The water

glistened and rippled invitingly. Streaks of red and purple still striped the sky, giving an ethereal sort of light to the world. A faint mist was creeping over the water already.

Breathing hard, Daphne stripped off her coat, leaving it crumpled on the ground. She toed off her boots and stepped forward... only to be immediately yanked back.

Stumbling, she collided with a firm, solid, and warm chest. She might have fallen, except that the grip on her arm was strong, keeping her upright. She blinked up at her assailant and was not in the least surprised that it was her husband-to-be.

“What,” Edward hissed, “do you think you are doing?”

She yanked her arm out of his grip. “What do you think you are doing? You said I could do what I wanted.”

“Yes, but you weren’t supposed to run away!”

She paused, narrowing her eyes at him. “You thought I was running away?”

He paused, shifting from foot to foot. She could see uncertainty creeping in. “Wasn’t that what you were doing?”

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Daphne placed her hands on her hips. “If I was going to run away, would I do it in a nightgown?”

“I don’t know,” he shot back defensively. “You’ve made plenty of poor choices lately. We both have.”

That was a fair point, and Daphne conceded it with a nod.

“I am not running away,” she said firmly. “I’m going swimming.”

He blinked at her for a long moment. “Swimming? At this time of day?”

“It’s the perfect time to swim.”

“It’s dark!”

“Not quite.”

“You’ll drown.”

“I can swim.”

“You’ll freeze.”

“It isn’t that cold. Besides, I’ll only be in the water for fifteen or twenty minutes. It’s refreshing and calms the mind. You should try it sometime,” she snarked. “You look as though you’re about to die from an apoplexy half the time.”

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I feel as though I’m about to die from an apoplexy. Sometimes I think it would be a mercy.”

“Don’t we all,” Daphne muttered.

She turned back towards the pool, her bare feet crunching against the shale. She’d intended to peel off her nightgown and swim naked—the most daring thing she could imagine—but she had no intention of doing that with him there. Goosebumps rose over her skin at the very thought.

She splashed deeper and deeper, the water like a silken caress, creeping up her calves, then over her knees, surging up her thighs until she was hip-deep. She turned then to face him and found that he was staring at her, his face unreadable.

“There, it’s not so bad,” she called. “You really should come in.”

“No, thank you.”

She arched an eyebrow, wading in deeper. “Are you going to stand there and gawp at me, then?”

He folded his arms tightly. “I am watching to make sure you don’t drown, woman, or else the papers will label me a murderer.”

She winced, plunging suddenly deeper, up to her chin. It was cold, and her teeth chattered, but it was a thrilling, refreshing sort of cold.

“I won’t drown.”

“You’d better not,” he muttered.

There was a boulder overhanging the edge of the pool, and he clambered on top of it and settled down, his legs hanging over the water. Daphne began to swim, rolling onto her back and letting her hair fan out around her, like a mermaid's. The nightgown was all but see-through now, plastered to her skin. She'd have to ask him to bring the coat right to the edge of the water, for modesty.

For some reason, that thought made desire tug at Daphne's gut again, color rushing to her feet. There was an ache in the bottom of her stomach, pulsing almost between her legs. That felt like a shocking thing, so she held her breath and dropped entirely under the water, hoping to cool away the thoughts.

It worked, a little. When she resurfaced, Edward was watching the place where she'd disappeared, looking anxious. As soon as their eyes met, the anxiety on his face evaporated.

"I thought you'd been told when the wedding would take place," he said, leaning back, "and you were running for your life."

"I've made my peace with it," Daphne responded, swimming a little closer to the side. The center of the pool was very deep, and she hadn't swum in such a long time. Better safe than sorry. It was certainly not because she wanted to be close to Edward. Not at all.

Edward watched her for a moment. "I won't be a cruel husband, you know. I really will leave you alone."

"Perhaps I don't want to be left alone," she shot back. "Perhaps I want somebody I can be friends with. The thing about always asking to be left alone, Edward, is that sometimes you get what you ask for."

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A muscle ticked in his jaw. "I don't have a knack for making people like me. You seem to have it. I bet Alex will have it when he grows up. He's already such a charming, pleasant, little boy. He likes everybody. Except me, of course."

Daphne sighed. "Of course, he likes you, Edward. You're his father. He's at that age where you're like a god to him. He adores you. But this age won't last, so you'll have to work hard to make him love you. You have to earn his trust."

"I took him horse riding," Edward said bitterly, "and I only ever seemed to say the wrong thing. I wouldn't let him make a jump that I thought was too big for him, and he was so angry. What am I supposed to do? I set a boundary, and he rages against it. If you set one, or Mrs. Trench, or anyone but me, he accepts it. I can't treason with him."

Daphne pursed her lips. "Because he's eight. Eight-year-olds aren't known for their logic. He seems precocious, so we treat him as if he were older, but he's still eight. I'm not a parent, so I can't give you proper advice, but I think you should persevere with him. He's worth it, isn't he?"

Edward swallowed, hanging his head. "Of course, he's worth it. I just... I don't know what to do. I don't know how to be different."

She ducked under the surface again, spitting out pond water when she came up.

"You could start by trying new ideas and doing interesting things to please others," she suggested. "Like swimming."

He narrowed his eyes at her and scrambled to his feet. For a moment, Daphne was entirely sure that he was going to storm off, leaving her to drown or freeze or swim as she preferred. Then, in one smooth movement, he peeled off his jacket and tossed it to the shale.

The boots came next, tossed one after the other to the ground. He unbuttoned his waistcoat and stripped off his cravat, and it abruptly struck Daphne that he was standing there in his breeches and a loose white shirt, and that was all.

The desire came hurtling back, undeterred by cold water and stern internal scoldings.

There was a pause, and Edward met Daphne's eyes just for an instant. She wasn't sure what passed between them, only that she was staring, and he was standing on top of the rock like some sort of disgraced Greek god, and she was rapidly getting out of her depth in more ways than one.

Edward pulled his shirt over his head and tossed the flimsy fabric away. Daphne's gaze, of course, dropped immediately to his bare chest.

He was breathtakingly well-sculpted, much like the Grecian statues she'd seen before, muscle and solid flesh rippling across his chest and down his abdomen. His shoulders were shockingly broad—no padding needed for the Duke of Thornbridge, thank you very much—and his arms were thick with muscle and sinew. There was a faint fuzz of dark hair on his chest, the top of which she'd glimpsed earlier, but that hair went all the way down his stomach in a line, disappearing beneath the waistband of his breeches.

The water wasn't cold anymore. Daphne felt as though she were on fire. The ache was back, and she had no idea, none at all, how to manage it.

Edward met her eyes again, but the sun had dipped lower, and the shadows

lengthened, and now she couldn't read his expression at all.

"Watch out," he said shortly, and without further warning, dived off the top of the boulder and into the middle of the pond, splashing Daphne in the face.

She was still spluttering when he came up, shaking his head and pushing wet hair out of his eyes. He was close, but he swam closer, his gaze almost too intense to bear but simultaneously impossible to look away from.

"I knew you wouldn't swim away," he said, his voice low. "I knew you wouldn't run away from me again."

Daphne sucked in a breath, a water droplet trickling down from her hairline. She was just out of her depth here, treading water, but she could tell that Edward had his feet on the bottom.

"I'll decide later," she said shakily. "I do what I want, you see."

He tilted his head. "Not everything that you want. You're mine, you see, Daphne Belmont."

She opened her mouth, hoping that some witty retort would come out, but somehow her head seemed to be empty, distracted by the thudding desire in her gut and the pounding of her heart.

"Not yet," she managed.

He grinned. It was a proper grin, the sort she rarely saw on his face.

"I think you've been mine since I first kissed you."

This time, the sharp retort came more quickly. “Oh, you think so?”

Abruptly, he dived forward, scooping her up in his arms and pulling her against him. His body was warm, so warm in contrast to the cold water, and Daphne wrapped her arms around his shoulders almost on instinct.

“I know so,” he whispered, his warm breath tickling her chin.

Then, he kissed her.

Oh, and it was a better kiss than last time.

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Molten heat surged through Daphne, plunging downwards into her core. It seemed unstoppable, but the helplessness was almost delicious.

They don't write about this in those books in the back of the library.

She kissed him back, curling her fingers across his broad, bare shoulders, pushing them up into his hair, and catching his lower lip between her teeth in a way that felt almost instinctual. He growled under his breath, and she felt the sound reverberate through her body.

They broke apart to breathe, and Edward ducked his head to kiss the side of her neck. When he dragged the flat of his tongue across the pulse point at her throat, she let out an undignified gasp. She felt him smile, his stubble scratching her chin.

She was floating, her legs dangling in the water, her nightdress streaming around them both. Edward pushed one hand below the surface, and she felt his palm flatten against her side. She could feel him, too, a hot hardness pressing against her thigh.

Fascinating.

Can you feel my heartbeat?

"You infuriating girl," he breathed, a catch in his voice. "You're going to be the death of me after we're married."

"I don't want to think about the future," Daphne heard herself say. "I'm tired of it. It gives me a headache. I only want to think about the here and now."

He blinked, swallowing. "Very well. I want that, too."

His hand ducked lower, cupping her hip. The touch seemed so much more than just a touch, sending prickles across her skin. Daphne didn't realize that Edward had found his way through the voluminous folds of her floating gown until his fingers danced across her thigh, skin to skin, with no fabric in the way.

He kissed her again, and she was glad that he was holding her up, or else she might have slipped under the surface, too weak to save herself, and drowned. Fingers traced up her thigh, all the way up to her hip bone, and danced across the curve of her lower stomach.

He's going to touch me there.

Daphne was thrilled and terrified. When his knuckles brushed the junction between her legs, it felt as though she'd been struck by lightning. She jerked reflexively, clinging to his shoulders.

Edward murmured something she could not hear, his voice muffled against the side of her neck. She tightened her grip, concentrating on breathing evenly.

His hand moved in a slow, almost languid way, tracing a line between her thighs again and again, as if the water were slowing them down.

Daphne's heart, though, was beating faster and faster and faster until she thought she was going to faint. She pushed her hand down through the water, curling her fingers around his wrist.

At once, Edward's movements ceased, and he pulled back to look at her.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked, his voice thick.

She swallowed. “Stop? No, please don’t stop.”

A slow smile broke across his face. “No, I didn’t think so.”

Tightening his grip on her waist, Edward pulled her closer, resuming his caresses. They sped up, the pressure increasing by a whisper, and Daphne felt something building up inside her, something that tensed up her core and made her breathing ragged. She had no breath left for kissing, so she pressed her forehead against the side of Edward’s neck and concentrated on holding on.

“You’re lovely,” he gasped, a ragged remark that seemed almost torn out of him. “You have no idea how much.”

Daphne was well past the opportunity to make sharp remarks. Breath coming hard, eyes squeezed shut, she shuddered as her climax hit her, rolls of pleasure making her shake.

It really did feel like drowning. In a good way, of course.

CHAPTER 14

What have you done, you fool?

Sucking in a breath, Edward released Daphne at once. That was a mistake, as she was not yet in her depth and immediately dropped underneath the surface of the water, flailing as she went.

Cursing himself for being a clumsy, thoughtless, endlessfool, Edward grabbed her again, lifting her and walking forward until the water was only chest-deep.

He should not have done that. He should not have kissed her, should not have

touched her, should not have...

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Edward clenched his jaw tight, his own words coming back to haunt him.

“You’re lovely. You have no idea how much.”

What had possessed him to say such a thing?

We had a bargain. A cool, distant marriage. That’s the best thing to keep her safe and keep me out of harm’s way. And yet here I am, ruining it all.

Why couldn’t I resist her?

He cleared his throat, not wanting to look down at her awestruck, luminous face. If he did, he might well do something even more foolish, like kissing her again or begging her to touch him too.

Fortunately, the water was cold enough to suppress the worst of his desire. Just as well, really.

“That was unexpected,” she said.

At some point, the stars above them had begun to pop out, one by one, glittering down.

“I’m sorry,” Edward muttered. “I should never have?—”

“No, I’m not upset,” she said instantly. Below the surface of the water, she took one of his hands in her own. “That was... well, it was excellent. Full marks. And anyway,

I'm already ruined. I don't think that swimming with my betrothed after sundown, alone, could do much to make things worse."

He had to smile at that, shaking his head. "It's true, neither of us could be any more disgraced. Even so, best to keep this to ourselves, don't you think?"

She winced. "What, do you think I'm going to run home and tell my parents all about what happened?"

"With you, Daphne Belmont, I never know what you're going to say or do next," he retorted.

She laughed aloud at that, throwing back her head, and warmth spread out across his chest.

"Still, we'd better get out of the water before we turn into icicles," she said, turning away from him and wading towards the shore.

Edward followed, feeling as if he were drawn on a string, tied to her and obliged to follow close behind.

She climbed out of the pond first, water streaming off her in rivulets. Moonlight cast a blue-and-silver sheen over her, her long dark hair hanging around her shoulders like a mermaid's.

No, not a mermaid. Mermaids were fairly innocuous creatures and generally preferred to be left alone. Or so Edward's classics studies had informed him.

Sirens, however, were different creatures entirely. One could not describe Daphne as malevolent in any way, of course, but there was no denying that if he pursued her now, disaster would follow.

Plug your ears and stay on the boat, man, he warned himself grimly.

Daphne shivered. She pulled her wet hair over her shoulder and picked up her discarded coat. Her thin white gown stuck to her like a second skin, tinged pink. Edward could see her nipples straining against the flimsy fabric and forced himself to look away.

“We should hurry back,” he said. “It’s getting dangerously cold. You’ll need a hot bath to warm up. I’ll order one as soon as we get home. By the way, I don’t know if anyone told you, but we’re getting married tomorrow.”

Daphne stilled. “Tomorrow?”

He sighed. “You didn’t know, then.”

She blinked, water glistening on her eyelashes. “Well, I know now, don’t I?”

Daphne woke up on the morning of her wedding feeling refreshed and wakeful. The evening swim had done her a world of good, as had the deliciously warm bath afterward.

And then there’d been Edward.

Goosebumps crawled over her skin as she remembered the searing kiss, the way his hands had drifted over her body. Even the memory of the rush of pleasure when he touched her made her shiver, curl up under the blankets, and hide a secret smile in her pillow.

They hadn’t talked much on the way back, as the cold had settled on them in earnest and their teeth were chattering too hard for conversation. Once they entered the house—through the back door, very furtively—they had parted ways. Edward hadn’t

forgotten about the hot bath, though, and the maids were filling up the tub in her washroom almost as soon as she reached the room. If they noticed that she was soaked to the skin and blue with cold, they did not mention it. Probably for the best.

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Daphne rolled onto her back, staring up at nothing in particular. Part of her had wondered whether Edward would join her later that night. That was how the books went, wasn't it? The lady would sleep chastely in her bed, ready to be convinced otherwise once the gentleman crawled in with her. The books tended to end with a demurely closed door and a sweet kiss, leaving it up to one's imagination what happened next.

Well, I don't need to use my imagination anymore. I know. Well, I know some of it.

There was more than just touching, she knew that. But if all of it was as agreeable as what she and Edward had done together—really, Daphne had not done much and could not take any credit—then she was willing to try new things.

Perhaps their marriage would be a little more like Anna and Theo's, rather than a cold and glacial Arrangement with a capital A. Perhaps it might be a little more real.

She smiled to herself, gathering the sheets up to her chest. For the first time in a while, the idea of marriage did not seem so very upsetting.

There was a knock at the door, and she swung herself out of bed.

Perhaps it's Edward, come to...

Her hopes were swiftly dashed as she opened the door.

"Oh, Mama, it's you. Good morning, Emily, Anna."

Her mother and sisters swept in, shooting her curious glances.

“You don’t seem happy to see us,” Emily said, her voice half-muffled behind an explosion of fabric and lace. Daphne’s wedding dress, it seemed, was ready. “I’d make the most of us if I were you. We’re going home the evening of the wedding. I wanted to stay, but Mama said that a woman shouldn’t have to have her wedding night with her entire family in the house.”

“My darling girl,” Octavia began, swanning grandly around and embarking on what sounded suspiciously like a rehearsed speech. “I cannot bear the thought of your unhappiness. If you have any doubts at all?—”

“Oh, stop it, Mama,” Anna huffed, throwing herself down on the edge of the bed. She was carrying an armful of flowers, Daphne noticed. For her bouquet, no doubt. “We all know that if Daphne ever wants to show her face in Society again—or if we do—she’ll have to marry the Duke. There’s simply no getting around it.”

Octavia’s face crumpled. “I hate the idea of my girls making miserable marriages.”

“I am not miserable, Mama,” Daphne assured her, standing up on her tiptoes to kiss her on the cheek. “Besides, he was married to Beatrice’s sister before, and Beatrice says that he’s a decent man, if a little odd. He isn’t cruel, and it is my fault anyway. I’m the one who turned up at his estate. If anyone is about to be miserable, it’s him.”

Did she believe that? No, she did not. Daphne couldn’t help but feel that she and Edward had a greater chance of happiness than before.

“Did he send a message for me? Or something?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

Anna frowned. “No, nothing. Why? Were you expecting something?”

Yes.

“No, of course not,” Daphne muttered. “I just thought... seeing as we are getting married in a few hours, he might have... Oh, it doesn’t matter.”

Anna and Octavia exchanged meaningful glances that Daphne did not like. Piqued, she turned away from them.

“Well, shall we get going?” she said, knowing full well that she sounded childish and hating it. “Am I getting ready or not?”

The dressing process was exceptionally arduous. Daphne’s patience, never a sturdy thing, was stretched to the limit. She was sure that her dress had no less than a hundred layers, and she found herself wondering with a naughty, little prickle how Edward would fare when it came to taking them off later that night.

She was sure, now, that they would have a proper wedding night. Despite all his talk of separate beds and separate lives, it seemed fair to assume that he felt attracted to her. He wanted her, and once they were married... well, they might as well enjoy themselves, shouldn’t they?

The thought sent a tingle of desire through her, and she had to firmly remind herself that she was in a room with her mother and her two sisters, and had better keep her mind on more maidenly matters for the time being.

A knock on the door made them all jump. Anna hurried to answer it.

“Is it Edward?” Daphne called before she could help herself.

Anna threw a baffled look over her shoulder. “Why would it be the Duke? Are you expecting him, Daphne?”

Daphne scowled, looking away. “No.”

“Oh, Lady Clarissa,” Anna said, sounding surprised. “Did you want to come in?”

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“Yes, if you don’t mind,” came the smooth reply. “I wanted to talk to Miss Daphne.”

Clarissa stepped inside, already dressed for the wedding and looking thoroughly elegant. She held a little, velvet-covered box in her hand.

“You look lovely, my dear,” Clarissa said, smiling nervously. “I... I think I am here to apologize.”

“You think?” Anna responded staunchly. “Are you, or aren’t you? You did more or less call our sister a woman of ill repute in front of the whole dinner table.”

Clarissa’s ears reddened. “Do not put words in my mouth, please. But I was too harsh, and I spoke without thinking. I am sorry, Daphne. I see Edward a good deal, you see, and live close by, so it’s in our best interests to get along. I wish I could take back my words, but I cannot. So, here is a small gift. I hope you’ll wear it today. A token of our friendship to come.”

She held out the box, and Daphne took it, smiling.

“That’s kind of you. Thank you. And please, think no more of it. We all said things we should not. Besides, you are Edward’s mother, so it’s entirely natural that you were concerned.”

Clarissa’s expression tightened. “Not his mother. His stepmother. Not that I mind the distinction, but Edward is always very clear. I... I tried to be his mother,” she added, glancing self-consciously about the room, “but I could never quite manage it. We’re friends, Edward and I, and I suppose that will have to be enough.”

That was an uncomfortable speech.

Daphne shifted from foot to foot and saw that the others also looked a little awkward. Before the silence could really settle in, she spoke up.

“Well, I am still grateful that you’re here, Lady Clarissa. And I’m sure we will be friends. Now, let’s see what you’ve brought me!”

She opened the velvet box, revealing a beautiful diamond necklace and a set of matching earrings. They were rather large and gaudier than she would have preferred. Her brocaded gown was a pale blue, and she was going to wear a set of sapphires to match, but Clarissa was watching her anxiously, wringing her thin hands and waiting for her response.

“They’re beautiful,” Daphne responded, honestly enough. “They must have cost a fortune. Do you truly mean for me to have these?”

“Of course,” Clarissa said, laughing in relief. “They’ll suit your dress nicely—diamonds go with everything—and they’ll be a fine beginning to your jewelry collection. The Duchess of Thornbridge must have a jewelry collection, you know! The late Duke bought these for me on our wedding day, and they were always my favorites.”

Daphne froze, her eyes wide. “These were a wedding present from your husband? Oh, Lady Clarissa, I cannot take them! I could wear them for today, as a sort of something borrowed, but to keep?—”

“No, I insist,” Clarissa interrupted, more firmly than before. “I want you to have them. I think my late husband would approve of this gift, and I’m sure that Edward will. You will wear them, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course,” Daphne responded.

There wasn’t really anything else to say.

Clarissa beamed. “Well then, I’m ready, so I’ll go down and meet you at the chapel. Good luck, my dear!”

She left without another word, and silence lingered in the room after she’d gone.

“Well,” Anna said, “what an impressive gift. Especially considering that she accused you of seducing the Duke deliberately only a little while ago.”

“Maybe that’s why she wants so badly to make amends,” Emily suggested, lacing up the last of the ties on the back of Daphne’s dress. “She seems... sad, doesn’t she?”

“She ought not to have told us about not being considered the Duke’s proper mother,” Octavia remarked, frowning to herself. “We aren’t family yet.”

“She’s going to be my mother-in-law, for all intents and purposes,” Daphne pointed out. “So I had better like her, hadn’t I?”

Emily finished the laces and leaned forward to kiss her twin sister on the cheek. “She seems nice enough, and the Duke will make a decent husband. All of this house will be yours, Daff! Isn’t that thrilling?”

“It is, a little,” Daphne admitted, smiling wryly. “I can’t quite believe I’m getting married. Married. Me!”

“We’re all shocked,” Anna remarked dryly, giving her a wink.

The diamond necklace sat cold and heavy on Daphne’s neck, and the earrings caught

the light and glittered whenever she turned her head.

“I’m ready, then,” she murmured, inspecting herself in the mirror one last time.

Another knock sounded at the door, but this time Alex stood there, beaming.

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He had clearly been scrubbed to within an inch of his life. His round face gleamed with cleanliness, and his hair was flattened down with pomade. He wore an immaculate, little suit which—despite everybody’s best efforts—already had a smudge of dirt on the cuff. Where he’d found dirt in the clean house, Daphne did not know. Aboutonnièresat in his buttonhole, matching the bouquet she intended to carry down the aisle.

“I’m to walk you to the chapel!” Alex said, smiling wide enough to show off just about all of his teeth. “Papa said I could. And I’m carrying the rings! They’re in this... Oh, wait, they aren’t there at all.”

There was a moment of taut silence while the little boy patted down all of his pockets and eventually found the pouch containing the rings in hisotherpocket.

“Not to worry,” he said with great confidence, “I have it all under control.”

“I am thrilled to hear it,” Daphne said, biting back a smile.

She offered him a hand, and he took it, leading her down the hallway and away from the little room that had so quickly become home.

“Are you nervous?” Alex asked, peering up at her.

She sighed. “A little. Areyou?”

“I should say so,” he confirmed. “But I’m excited, too. At least, I think I am. It’s a little hard to tell, at times.”

She squinted down at him. “How many weddings have you been to, then?”

Alex paused, screwing up his face while he calculated. “Including this one?”

“Yes.”

“None.”

“Ah.”

On cue, Peter Tinn poked his head around a door at the end of the hallway. “There you are,” he said, looking a little nervous. “I suggest you hurry, Miss Belmont. The Duke isn’t a patient man. He won’t want to be kept waiting, and certainly not on his wedding day.”

Daphne cleared her throat. “Well, as his bride, he will simply have to wait forme, won’t he?”

Peter eyed her for a long moment. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that if I were you, Miss Belmont.”

CHAPTER 15

Edward’s heart was hammering under his blue, brocaded waistcoat.

The material, of course, had been specified by Daphne’s mother, to match the wedding dress. Edward found that he couldn’t remember what he’d worn to his first wedding, and for some reason, that bothered him.

The chapel was mostly full, and people were whispering and nudging each other, the susurrus of voices drifting up the high ceiling. He kept his back turned, staring ahead

at the altar. Dozens of gazes burned into his back. He tried to ignore them.

It'll be over soon. Unless, of course, she decides to run again.

That was an unpleasant thought, and Edward immediately wished he had not considered it. The thought would not be dismissed now, of course.

On cue, the door at the back of the chapel opened, and the whispers ceased abruptly. He could hear the rustle of skirts as the entire congregation rose to their feet, turning to watch the bride walk in.

Edward counted under his breath, marking off the steps she would take towards him. He turned when she was about halfway down the aisle.

At once, his breath caught in his throat.

Daphne looked breathtaking.

Her dark hair was piled on top of her head, sleek curls coming down to hang around her neck. Tiny glass flowers glinted in the depths of her hair. Her dress, blue and heavy and brocaded, suited her perfectly. The color made her skin look smooth and creamy, and the simple cut flattered her to perfection. The neckline was a little low, daringly cut around her shoulders, displaying the smooth lines of her collarbone.

She wore a diamond necklace and matching earrings, which, while beautiful, were a little too large in Edward's opinion.

It didn't change the way his mouth went dry when he saw her, and how his heart hammered in his chest.

Beautiful. She's beautiful. So beautiful.

Their eyes met, and Daphne broke into a slow, nervous smile. It wasn't proper, of course, for a bride to smile too much on her wedding day. Maiden modesty and polite reluctance to wed were required, but apparently, Daphne had not heard of this rule. Her smile grew as she advanced towards him, turning into a wide grin.

But her smile faltered as they came closer, and Edward realized a moment too late that she was not smiling, only staring at her with what she no doubt interpreted as a glare.

Too late to change it now.

Alex, who had escorted Daphne down the aisle, beamed up at his father, and Edward remembered to smile encouragingly.

"Well done," he whispered as Alex took his place beside him. "The rings?"

"I have them, Papa."

Edward breathed out. That was a relief, at least. Perhaps entrusting the wedding rings to an eight-year-old boy was not a good idea.

It didn't matter, though. They were here, and it was time. Side by side, Edward and Daphne turned to face the rector.

"Dearly beloved..." he began.

The rest of the wedding ceremony was a blur. The rector droned on. Vows were made, rings exchanged, and then it was over.

Well, almost over.

“You may kiss the bride, Your Grace,” the rector said, smiling and taking a step backward.

Edward hesitated, glancing down at his new wife.

Daphne was looking up at him, her face flushed. To his surprise, he saw desire glittering in her eyes when she looked at him.

She wants me, he realized, with a flash of disbelief. Last night changed things.

I should not have done it.

She doesn't deserve whatever curse hangs over me. I don't deserve her. It's up to me to stop this, then.

Swallowing, he leaned forward, placing a chaste peck on her cheek. When he pulled back, Daphne was looking up at him still, but this time she was confused, and perhaps a little... a little hurt.

Edward turned away to face the congregation. It was easier than looking at the hurt in her eyes.

Daphne glanced at her new husband several times during the wedding breakfast.

He didn't speak to her. He hadn't spoken to her since he'd mechanically promised to love and honor her forever.

I'm married. I'm married. I am married.

The words kept rolling around and around in her head, echoing in disbelief. Married.

It hadn't escaped her notice that the panic she'd felt when she was approaching the Duke of Clapton was absent when she walked towards Edward. There'd been a flutter of nerves, of course, a little prickle of anxiety at being looked at so intensely, but the chest-crushing fear had not been there. Never once during the ceremony had she thought that she could not breathe. She hadn't even stuttered during her I-dos.

But there was a sort of awkwardness between them now, an ice that had just sprung up over the past few hours. Last night had felt so easy, and she'd felt as though they could never be uncomfortable with each other again.

Well, she was wrong about that.

The two of them sat at the head of a long, wide table, set up in the lower half of the ballroom. Musicians sat on a platform at the other end of the room, the gentle music drifting down. The breakfast was mostly over, and people were talking now instead of eating, or milling around. Nobody was dancing yet, though. They couldn't, not until the bride and groom took to the floor. Preferably together.

"Did you like the waistcoat my mother picked out for you?" Daphne said, in something like desperation.

She was hungry, but the constricting gown prevented her from eating too much. Or breathing too deeply. She was looking forward to taking it off at the end of the day, although she had a sneaking suspicion that Edward would not be the one unlacing it for her.

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“It’s a very good waistcoat,” he responded, as bland as could be.

She waited for a question or a follow-up remark. When none came, she spoke again, a little desperately.

“And my gown, did you like it? I thought it was very pretty.”

“Very pretty,” he echoed, and the silence descended once more.

Daphne sat back in her seat, fighting down the feeling of despair.

“Have I done something to offend you?” she asked bluntly.

He flinched, casting a bewildered glance in her direction. “Keep your voice down, please!”

She leaned forward, narrowing her eyes at him. “Why should I? Why shouldn’t I make a scene? I’m good at that, Your Grace. I can assure you of that.”

“I don’t need assurances,” he muttered unhappily. “I know it quite well enough. I just don’t like large gatherings, and I don’t like being the center of attention. Unfortunately, both of those are inevitable when it is one’s wedding day.”

Daphne frowned, blinking at him. “You’re angry with me.”

He looked away. “Of course, I’m not angry with you.”

“You are, I can tell. I don’t understand. If I’ve done something wrong, please, tell me what it is. Tell me what I’ve done wrong, for heaven’s sake. I don’t understand, because last night everything was...”

He turned to face her, reaching out as if to take her hand and thinking better of it at the last minute.

“Daphne, I beg you, do not mention that again,” he whispered urgently. “You think our reputations can’t be damaged any further? Think again. I know you thought—we both thought—that we had already sunk low enough, but believe me, there’s always further to go. Let’s tread carefully, shall we?”

Daphne said nothing, and he leaned back, picking up a glass of wine. She looked away, feeling stupid as tears pricked her eyes.

What did you think was going to happen? Did you think that one moment of intimacy would change his mind entirely? He wanted a practical marriage, a marriage of convenience. He made that plain. And you, my girl, agreed. If you’ve changed your mind, then that is your concern.

Perhaps you should guard your heart a little better in the future.

There was a lump in her throat that wouldn’t go away, no matter how much she tried to swallow. Her empty plate blurred under her gaze, and she began to worry that she was about to shame herself in public, at her own wedding breakfast.

She sniffed, loudly, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Edward glance at her. Worrying his lip between his teeth, he leaned forward and cleared his throat.

“Daphne? Are you... That is to say, have I...”

“Miss Belmont!” chirped an eager voice, and they both lurched apart as if they’d been caught doing something terrible.

It was Alex, of course, skipping over from the children’s table. Mrs. Trench was eyeing him from her seat, her gaze unreadable. It occurred to Daphne that Mrs. Trench could look straight at the two of them, and might well have seen the angry whispers and Daphne’s barely-held-back tears.

Alex paused, frowning. “I shouldn’t call you Miss Belmont now, should I? Papa, what should I call her?”

“I... You must ask her yourself, I think,” Edward managed, his voice tight.

He was still looking at Daphne out of the corner of his eye, opening and closing his mouth as if he had something to say.

Daphne cleared her throat, leaning forward with a smile. “I think you can call me Daphne if you like. Or Daff, or Daffie. That is what my sister called me. I’ve always been fond of that nickname.”

Alex seemed pleased. “I like Daffie. That’s a nice nickname. I already have one, you see. Alex. But, Daffie, you don’t seem happy. Mrs. Trench was just saying how sad you looked.”

Daphne flinched.

“I think Mrs. Trench ought to concentrate on her breakfast and minding her charge, instead of making comments,” Edward muttered sourly.

Alex only glanced between them, his eyes large. “Are you upset, Daffie?”

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She leaned forward, plastering on a smile. “I was upset, but only because nobody was dancing. I would like to dance, but I don’t have a partner, you see.”

Alex nodded as if this were a very acceptable reason for sadness. “I understand. I will dance with you if you like, Daffie.”

Daphne smiled. “I’d love that, Alex. Are you sure? Have you finished your breakfast?”

He nodded seriously. “Just a moment. Nobody would want to dance with this nonsense playing.”

It took a moment for Daphne to realize what was happening.

Turning on his heel, Alex scurried across the empty floor, waving his arms to get the attention of the musicians. There was a ripple of silence in his wake, everybody leaning forward to see what the little boy was doing.

“Excuse me,” he said, his high, clear voice carrying easily across the ballroom, “but could you play something with a little bit of life in it?”

There was a wave of laughter at this. Mrs. Trench covered her smile with a hand, and even Edward seemed to smile. Just a little.

The chief musician chuckled, smiling and nodding indulgently. They started playing a light-hearted jig, something that had the other guests tapping their spoons on their plates and nodding in time.

Alex turned, clearly pleased with himself, and held out his hand. The guests gave out a ragged cheer, seeing that he was asking his new stepmother to dance. Smiling, Daphne got to her feet and crossed the floor towards him.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Alex whispered when she was close enough. “But I thought you could teach me.”

“Dancing, for the most part, is about having fun,” Daphne assured him. “Besides, it’s my wedding day, so we can dance how we want. So long as you don’t tread on my toestoomuch.”

Alex beamed. “I can do that.”

He was much smaller than Daphne, of course, so there was no question of doing any of the conventional dances. She took his hands in hers and winked encouragingly.

“We step this way... then this way... and then around in a circle. We step back, clap our hands once, and clasp hands again. Step again... and again... Very good! Now, you let go of my hand, and we turn away and spin in a circle again.”

Alex spun so fast that he nearly overbalanced, and Daphne laughed loudly.

“No, no, slowly! And gracefully. We turn around the shoulder like this. We make a performance of it.”

Alex pouted, making a good impression of the vain dandies Daphne had danced with before.

She laughed again, clapping. “Yes, yes, good! You’re getting the hang of this. You’re a natural, Alex.”

“I always liked the idea of dancing,” Alex confessed. “I told Mrs. Trench, and she asked Papa to hire a dancing master for me, but he said I was too young and dancing wasn’t enjoyable anyway. I think he just thinks that men oughtn’t to dance.”

Daphne’s smile faded a little. “Well, there are some people who think that.”

She shot a glance across the room, where Edward sat alone, his gaze fixed on them. Their eyes met, and a shiver ran down her spine, even though she did not want it to.

All those novels talk a great deal about heroines calming their minds to tranquility and other such nonsense. Well, it isn’t true. I can’t for the life of me be tranquil. And it’s all his fault.

“It seems to me,” she said, after a pause, “that your Papa does not like dancing and assumes that you will feel the same.”

“Why would he not like dancing?”

She shrugged. “Many people like different things. We’re all different, after all.”

As the jig progressed, a few other couples tentatively took to the dance floor. Anna and Theo were one of them. Beatrice, heavy with child, did not but seemed to be trying to convince her poor husband, Stephen, to ask Emily to dance. Emily seemed mightily horrified by the idea.

A few of the couples were dancing properly. Others still were copying Daphne and Alex’s silly, made-up, little dance, laughing and stepping on each other’s toes.

For the first time in a while, it felt like a wedding. Daphne took Alex’s hand and spun him in a circle underneath her hand.

“You’re meant to do the spinning! You’re the lady!” Alex complained. “I knowthatmuch.”

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“Well, you are so very small.” Daphne laughed. “When you’re taller than me, we’ll dance again, and then I will do the spinning.”

“Well, Papa grew very tall very quickly,” Alex muttered, piqued. “So that will be something to look forward to.”

Something to look forward to. Daphne smiled to herself. He’s a sweet boy. I’ll do my best to be a good mama to him.

Heaven help us both.

The music sped up, and they spun faster and faster, stumbling over the made-up steps and laughing, losing their rhythm and almost bumping into the other dancers.

And then Daphne very nearly bumped into a tall, solid wall of a man.

It was, of course, her husband. He stood tall and very straight-backed, his shoulders squared and his face impassive. The dancers whirled around him, making a conscious effort not to knock into him. The three of them were now standing still in the middle of a busy dance floor, no doubt minutes or even seconds away from a collision.

“Edward,” she gasped, breathing hard and trying to steady herself. “What were you thinking, walking onto the dance floor like that? You’ll cause chaos.”

He smiled tightly. “The only one causing chaos is you, my dear bride. What dance is this, by the way?”

“It’s made up,” Alex volunteered.

Daphne felt the color rush to her cheeks. “I suppose you’ve come to tell us to stop,” she mumbled. “Am I embarrassing you, my dear husband?”

Edward smiled grimly. “No. I’m harder to embarrass than you might think. And I did not come to tell you to stop. I came to ask—with Alex’s permission, of course—if I might dance with you, Daphne.”

CHAPTER 16

Daphne stared up at Edward, trying to read his expression.

It was no good, of course. He only looked back down at her, his eyes cold and distant.

“I don’t mind,” Alex answered his father stoutly, turning to look up at Daphne. “Daffie? Do you mind?”

Daphne was briefly curious as to what would happen if she said no. She’d never heard of a bride refusing to dance with her groom on their wedding day, but doubtless, it had occurred before.

“Of course, I’ll dance with him,” she responded, addressing Alex but keeping her eyes on Edward.

She felt as though she couldn’t tear her gaze away from him, as if they were stuck together by magnetism or something silly like that.

“I’m going back for more cake,” Alex decided and skipped away towards the refreshments table.

That left the two of them alone and in greater danger of being knocked into by the other dancers than before.

“We ought to dance, then,” Edward said, extending a hand.

Daphne took it, and she abruptly found herself pulled against him, his hand on her waist and her other hand in his—a waltz position. They twirled around, falling into the circular flow of the other dancers.

The last time Daphne had been this close to him, they’d been neck-deep in cold water and in a rather shocking state of undress. She swallowed hard, trying to keep her mind on other things. It was not entirely working.

“So, what have I done wrong now, then?” she asked, a trifle breathless. She told herself it was only from the speed of the dance.

“Done wrong? Why, do you think that I came over here to scold you?” Edward remarked dryly. “In front of your friends and family, and all of our guests?”

“Well, I don’t know. Did you?”

He smiled tightly. “No. Although there is still time.”

“Ha-ha,” she deadpanned. “So, to what do I owe this honor, then?”

“Honor? It’s our wedding day. I could hardly avoid dancing with you.”

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She sighed. “What a compliment, Your Grace. It’s incredible that a charming gentleman such as yourself wasn’t snatched up before now.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw, and Daphne wondered briefly if she’d gone too far. She decided that she didn’t care if she had. The man had made it abundantly clear that he did not care about her, only his reputation.

“It’s clear that you aren’t happy, today,” Edward said abruptly. “My behavior may be to blame. It can’t be changed, but I’m sorry.”

“Can’t be changed, or won’t be changed?”

Edward pursed his lips. “A little of both. A bride should never be unhappy on her wedding day. I remember when Jane and I married, she smiled all day and talked incessantly about it for weeks. She was happy that day. So happy.”

There was a faintly distant expression on his face, tinged with something like regret.

A lump had formed in Daphne’s throat. “I’m sorry.”

He glanced at her. “Sorry? What for?”

She shrugged. “She’s so beautiful and sounds like a wonderful woman. I must be quite the disappointment after her.”

He regarded her for a long moment. “Jane and I were friends,” he said, at last. “There was no romantic love between us. It was a marriage of convenience and practicality,

but I was not in love with her, and she was not in love with me. She told me once that she had never been in love, and never cared to be. She found it a troublesome business. We had to produce an heir, of course, but after that..." he trailed off, clearing his throat. "After that, Jane had hinted that she would prefer a cold bed. I respected her choice."

Daphne felt the color rise to her neck. Had she pushed too much? Ought she to have minded her own business?

Still, this is the most Edward has ever told me about himself.

"She sounds like a decent woman," Daphne heard herself saying. "It's a pity she met such a tragic end."

"Yes, it is," Edward responded. "But that's the curse, you see. The Thornbridge curse, attacking the women in my family."

Daphne frowned, peering up at him, trying to work out whether he was serious or not.

"You don't believe in curses," she stated. "And neither do I."

He shrugged. "You know, when my mother died, it was something of a surprise. She was sturdy and strong, and according to the midwives, the birth had gone remarkably well, for a first baby. They weren't too concerned. Their focus was on me, as I was smaller and weaker than they had hoped. Mother died quickly in the hours following my birth. My father never recovered."

Daphne wasn't entirely sure how to react to this sudden outpouring of feeling. Or was it a real feeling? Was he not simply stating the facts?

"I'm sorry," she said. "That must have been difficult."

“I’m not the only child who lost a parent, and my father is certainly not the only man who lost a beloved wife in childbirth.” His expression tightened, and his gaze was fixed somewhere above the top of Daphne’s head. “There was no reason why we could not have managed it. But we did not, and there’s no changing it now.”

There was a tense silence after that. The music, chatter, and laughter seemed to press in on Daphne’s ears, almost unbearably so. Her bodice was too tight, her head was starting to ache, and yet she still felt the now-familiar tug of desire when she stood too close to Edward. It was baffling and infuriating.

“I decided,” Edward continued, more to himself than anyone, “that Alex would not be treated the same way that I was. It was not his fault that his mother died. If anything, it was mine.”

She swallowed. “I think you’re being a little hard on yourself.”

“I think I’m not hard enough. You have to spin, Daphne.”

A little disconcerted, Daphne allowed herself to be spun in a neat, little circle. The dance resumed. She was getting dizzy. When had all the guests fallen into the same pattern of dancing? She wished she could be back with little Alex again, alone on the dance floor, dancing their own silly, little dance.

“Why won’t you let Alex in the gallery?” she burst out.

Edward sighed. He took so long to respond that she had begun to think she would not get an answer. Then, at last, he spoke.

“For the same reason that I don’t let him eat too much marzipan. At first, I encouraged Alex to go into the gallery and look at Jane’s picture. I wanted him to know about her, to talk about her. I didn’t want her to be forgotten, least of all by her

own son. But Alex became... well, a little obsessed. He spent hours in there, looking up at her. He asked constant questions about her, about how she had died, and I soon realized that he fully blamed himself for it. He would say as much—that it was his fault, that if he'd never been born, she wouldn't have died—and it was entirely too much to hear from a young boy. No child should be held responsible for their parent's death in that way."

He added the last part quietly, almost in a whisper.

Daphne's heart contracted in sadness, and then in horror as she realized that she felt sad for him.

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“I’m sorry,” she said, meaning it. “I didn’t mean to break your rule about him being let into the gallery.”

He shook his head. “It’s done. It hardly matters.”

The music was speeding up, drawing to a triumphant climax. Soon, the dance would be over, the dancers would laugh and clap and bow to each other, and then step off the dance floor.

Daphne knew, somehow, that she and Edward would be among them.

“You’re a good dancer,” she heard herself saying. “It’s a pleasant surprise.”

She was rewarded with a wry smile. “Thank you.”

“As to these rules of yours, I wanted to talk to you about it all.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oh? I would hurry up if I were you. The dance is almost over.”

There could be other dances, she felt like saying. We could dance together for the next set, and the next, and the next, if we wished.

But you don’t wish, do you, Edward? This will be our first dance, and also our last.

I can’t make you out at all. Do you want me, or do you not? Do you even know yourself?

“I can’t live a life dictated by rules and distance,” she said. “I would like us to renegotiate.”

He frowned. “Renegotiate? We’re barely married. You might prefer the rules. It’s good to set boundaries in a marriage, is it not?”

She shook her head. “I can’t live a life alone. I won’t.”

The music ended with a flourish, making her jump. The dance seemed to grind to a halt, and Daphne could barely contain her irritation.

All around them, partners were stepping away from each other, laughing and smiling.

Edward did not let go of her. His arm was still around her waist, his chest still pressed against hers. His fingers tightened around her smaller hand, and she felt tingles rush up her arm, prickles of desire tracing a path up and down her spine.

It was not convenient, but of course, there was nothing to do about it.

“You want my company, then, Duchess?” Edward murmured, staring down into her eyes with an expression she could not interpret. “How very interesting.”

She felt herself turning red, the flush creeping up her neck and staining her cheeks.

Part of Daphne wanted to be defiant, to pull herself free from his grasp and loudly inform him that she did not and would not ever want his wretched company. It would feel good in the moment, despite the forthcoming embarrassment.

She did not, though, even though his grip on her waist and her hand was not tight enough to prevent her from pulling away.

“I...” she managed, but no proper words came out.

Edward only smiled and released her. Stepping away, he executed a neat bow at the waist and abruptly turned and strode off into the crowd.

Daphne brushed out her hair, then plaited it. After a moment, she unplaited it and brushed it loose again. Perhaps it would look better that way.

It did not look better—she looked a little too messy now—and with a growl of annoyance, she began to plait it again.

Downstairs, everything was quiet. The last guests had left, and she had watched the carriage trundle down the drive. It had been close to an hour since she had retired to bed, slipping away to avoid the meaningful smiles and raised eyebrows that her guests would surely throw her way.

Edward had all but disappeared since their dance. She had seen him, occasionally, moving here and there, speaking to his son, speaking to Mrs. Trench, speaking to a few select family friends. Polite and pleasant, he was everywhere and nowhere and seemed adept at avoiding most of the guests.

And his bride, it seemed.

Daphne did not remember the name of the maid who’d helped her out of her wedding gown and into her night dress. She thought she should try and remember, as it was that woman who was likely going to wait on her from now on. The girl had chattered, seeming friendly enough, but Daphne had found herself staring despondently into the mirror and saying nothing as she was unlaced out of her many layers of clothing.

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I thought Edward would be the one to do this.

She knew, of course, that it was silly to pin her hopes on him like that. Edward had shown no inclination to join her for the night. In fact, his conversation about rules and boundaries in a marriage suggested quite the opposite.

However, his last words to her still sent prickles down her spine. His voice had been so low and hungry when he spoke, intense enough to make her knees feel like jelly.

“You want my company, then, Duchess? How very interesting.”

She shivered at the memory, placing the end of her freshly plaited hair in her mouth and biting down. What had he meant by that? Was it possible that he meant that he intended their marriage to be a little more traditional?

He must visit me tonight. After all, for the marriage to be legally binding, it must be consummated, mustn't it? The history books talked about that a good deal, as well as some of the more risky novels.

Why would he not come to me? He did desire me, I was sure of it.

Or was she? Daphne reluctantly admitted, to herself at least, that she did not know the ways of men very well. She did not understand how attraction between men and women came about.

For example, Anna and Theodore. Daphne liked her brother-in-law well enough but did not understand how Anna adored him. He was handsome, yes, but also infuriating

and rather hot-tempered.

But then so is my sister.

Oh, bother. What does any of this have to do with Anna, or Theo, or men in general? Edward must be coming to visit me tonight if only to say goodnight.

She got up and crossed to the door, carrying a candle with her. In the hope of creating a romantic atmosphere, Daphne had blown out all the candles except one, and of course the fire. It was rather a mistake because now her room was entirely too dark, and long, ominous shadows flickered across the floor. It was cold, too, and drafts whistled about her bare feet and ankles.

If it had been a scene from one of her favorite novels, she would have opened the door to find Edward outside, his fist raised to knock. After a moment's shy amusement, they would have fallen into each other's arms and, from there, into bed.

But her life was not a novel, and Edward was not there, and Daphne found herself glumly staring at the empty hallway beyond. The candle guttered in a sudden breeze. She poked her head out into the corridor, looking this way and that. Nothing. Nobody.

A surge of annoyance rushed through her.

Well, I am not a swooning heroine.

She angrily stamped back into her room and swung a robe around her shoulders.

I am not going to die of love on a moor or waste away for no discernable reason at all. I'm a Belmont, and that means trouble.

Trouble for everybody else, of course.

Shoving her feet into a pair of thin slippers—they didn't do much to ward off the chill coming up from the floor, but they were better than nothing—Daphne snatched up the candle again and stormed out into the corridor.

She probably made a great deal of noise as she stamped along, but nobody came to shout at her for waking them up. Her room was in the west wing of the house, and she was fairly sure that Edward's was in the east wing. The gentlemen's rooms, they called it. When she crossed the landing into the other wing, she slowed, keeping an eye out for lights under the doors.

Thankfully, each spare room was labeled with a discreet brass plaque on the door. Her rooms, she knew, were the Duchess's Rooms, always set aside for the first lady of the house. Therefore, she knew which room she was looking for now.

The Duke's Rooms were set at the very end of a corridor, facing towards her. There was a thin beam of light creeping out from under the door. Swallowing back a flutter of nerves, Daphne banged on the door before she could let herself lose her nerve.

A few tense seconds followed. There was shuffling on the other side. Her heart pounded in her ears. Was that normal? She was sure it could not be.

A lock clicked, and the door opened.

And there he was.

Edward stared down at his bride, looking faintly confused. He wasn't yet dressed for bed, still wearing a pair of tight breeches, a loose white shirt, and his unbuttoned waistcoat, which hung loosely around him. His hair was disheveled as if he'd been running his fingers through it repeatedly.

“Daphne,” he burst out, his eyes wide. She had the satisfaction of knowing that, for one, she’d surprised him. “What are you doing here?”

“We have to talk,” Daphne responded, shouldering him aside and stepping inside, without waiting for an invitation. “Close the door, won’t you, dear?”

CHAPTER 17

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Daphne took a moment to orient herself. Edward's room was very different from her own. It was, to her surprise, smaller, and much cozier. The fire crackled and snapped, and there were hardly more candles than there had been in her room when she left. The bed was made, piled with blankets and a long, soft-looking fur over the bottom. A single chair was angled towards the fire, and Edward had clearly been sitting in it before she arrived. A half-drunk glass of brandy sat on a low table beside the chair.

"What are you doing, Daphne?" Edward said, recovering. He was still standing in the doorway, blinking at her. "I was just about to go to sleep."

"I, too, would like to go to sleep," she answered grandly. "But I was waiting for you."

She wanted to sit down, but there was only one armchair, and that clearly belonged to him. Sitting on the edge of the bed was a step too far, she thought.

He raised an eyebrow and closed the door with a slam.

"Oh? And why was that, dearest?"

She rolled her eyes. "It is our wedding night, Edward. We must... you know."

"No," he answered, not quite able to keep the amusement from his voice. "I don't know. Do enlighten me, won't you? What do you expect from me tonight? Here I thought I had been very clear about the sort of marriage we would have. You agreed to those terms. A verbal agreement is binding, you know."

"Only if it can be proved."

“You deny it, then?”

She sighed, setting down the candle on the table beside the brandy and pulling her robe a little tighter around herself.

“I am concerned, Edward, about legal issues.”

He stared at her for a long moment. The silence was absolute.

“Legal issues?” he echoed.

She pursed her lips. The conversation had gone very differently in her mind. Still, there was nothing to be done about that now.

“If our marriage is not... well, not consummated, might it not be invalid?”

Edward folded his arms across his broad chest, leaning back against the closed door.

“That sort of thing,” he said carefully, “is not easy to prove. We aren’t required to flap our used sheets about, showing them to all and sundry in the morning, you know. These are not medieval times, my dear.”

She flushed. “Well, even so. As I said, potential legal issues. It’s worth considering, is it not?”

He stared at her for a long moment. It infuriated her that she could not tell what he was thinking, but then it was likely that nobody could.

“You waited for me,” he said, “even after I told you that our marriage would be one of convenience and we would both retreat to our cold beds each night? I thought I was clear.”

She laced her fingers together, trying to appear as cool and composed as he was. She suspected it was not working.

“And I told you that I wanted companionship, that I did not want to live my life alone.”

Edward took a moment before he spoke. “Then we are at an impasse, My Lady,” he said, his voice soft.

For some reason, this made her angry.

Daphne stomped forward until she was only a few inches away from him, tilting her head back to look him in the eye, breathing fire.

“An impasse? What is that supposed to mean? I know you desire me, Edward. I know it, and you know that I feel the same. What stops us from being together? I’m not asking you to be a real husband to me. I am not asking for a family, or a sweet, romantic relationship. I don’t expect us to grow old together, sitting by the fire in companionable silence. I am only asking for... well, for this.”

She fell silent after her little speech, a little horrified at her audacity.

Am I really asking a man to bed me? With such fervor? Good heavens. Mama would have an apoplexy if she knew.

Anna would never let me live it down.

Edward was still staring at her, his eyes narrowed.

“Yes,” he said, at last. “What woman would want romance, companionship, and a family? What a nonsensical idea.”

She flushed. “You were the one who told me how things would be.”

Abruptly, he pushed off the door, taking a step forward and closing the distance between them. He would have pressed against her if she hadn’t taken an involuntary step back.

“To be clear,” he drawled, “your only concerns here are legal ones, yes?”

She turned redder than ever, probably resembling a ripe beet at this point.

“Of course,” she managed.

He took another step forward, and she took another step back. She bumped against the newel of his bedpost, but he kept coming, looming over her. If only the wretched man were not sotall.

“So, you’d like our marriage to be official,” he continued, half speaking to himself. “And so we must bed each other for tonight, at least?”

She cleared her throat. “It’s not an unreasonable request.”

“No, but I suspect that you don’t mind making unreasonable requests, my dear

Duchess.”

“Stop that.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Stop what?”

“Stop calling me things other than my name. Duchess, My Lady, dearest—all that nonsense. I don’t like pet names. The least you can do is use my name.”

He tilted his head. He was entirely too close now.

The bedpost was digging into the small of Daphne’s back, but if she breathed too deeply, her chest would brush his. It was terrifying and exciting all at once.

There was now a small furrow between Edward’s eyebrows, and she felt the wildest urge to reach up and press it with the pad of her thumb, smoothing it away.

When she felt his fingertips graze the side of her neck, entirely without warning, she jolted.

“Why did you have to come into my life, you wretched minx?” he ground out. “Everything was fine before. And now...” he trailed off.

Daphne swallowed thickly, unable to tear her gaze away from his. Never one to let things lie, she had to speak. Of course.

“And now what?” she prompted.

He grinned, a slow, tired grin that revealed sharp teeth. His fingers ghosted over the front of her throat—an odd but not entirely unpleasant sensation.

“Now, all I can think about is you,” he breathed. “What I want to say to you, what I want to do to you... It’s rather bothersome, I can assure you.”

She swallowed again, and this time he must have been able to trace the movement with his fingers. He lifted his hand, the pad of his thumb swiping across her chin, and then slowly, so slowly across her bottom lip.

Daphne was sure her eyes were as round as teacup saucers, and she was equally sure that she hadn’t breathed for at least a minute.

“Oh,” she managed. It felt woefully inadequate.

Between that heartbeat and the next, everything changed.

Edward swooped down, pressing his lips roughly to hers. Daphne felt the release of desire inside her, powerful enough to make her feel wobbly. She clutched his shoulders for support, and he slid his arms around her waist. His lips were dry, tasting of brandy and salt, and when Daphne caught his lower lip between her teeth—which he had done to her before, and which she had liked a surprising amount—he made a low sound deep in his chest. It made the desire pooling in her gut spike higher, and the pulsing between her legs seemed to intensify.

Abruptly, she found herself lifted off her feet and into his arms. Daphne had assumed, of course, that he was going to stand there, holding her tight, as he had when they were in the pond. And so when she was wrenched away from him and tossed bodily into the air, she let out a surprised, undignified squeak.

She landed on the bed, bouncing once or twice. The fur was smooth against her cheek and her bare legs. It occurred to her that her nightgown had come up around her knees, rather shockingly displaying her calves.

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She barely had time to catch her breath before the mattress dipped and Edward crawled over her. He hovered above her, flushed and breathing heavily. Daphne's hand rose of its own accord, skimming across the sharp line of his jaw.

"You have no idea what you do to me, wretched woman," he breathed, his voice cracking.

"I thought I told you to call me Daphne," she responded.

He growled and lunged down to kiss her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, trying to pull him down towards her, trying to get him to put his weight on her. She wasn't sure how she knew that it was something she wanted, but she did want it. It felt as though every fiber of her being was singing, wanting him.

Abruptly, he slid out of her grasp, pulling himself further down her body until his chin rested on the center of her sternum. He glanced up at her, his eyes dark with lust, and she reached down impulsively to touch his hair. It fell over his forehead, hiding his eyes, and she smoothed it back.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, but no words came out. Instead, he pressed a kiss to her stomach, through the fabric of the nightgown, and she felt the heat of his lips.

He sank lower, and when he threw her thighs around his shoulders, Daphne realized in a dizzying rush what he meant to do.

“Edward...” she managed, her voice thick, and he glanced up at her.

He pressed a kiss to the inside of her thigh, the prickle of stubble scratching the sensitive skin.

“You might have marched in here and demanded I do my husbandly duties,” he said, his voice as harsh as gravel, “but I won’t force you to do something you don’t wish to. If you want me to stop, Daphne, you only need to say the word.”

She swallowed, trying in vain to get some moisture into her mouth.

“I... I don’t want you to stop.”

He grinned, looking more beastly than she could have imagined.

“I’m glad to hear it.”

When he put his mouth on the junction between her legs, Daphne’s whole body jerked, awestruck. She could not have imagined a sensation like it, and it rippled through her whole being, forcing out all other thoughts. She arched her back without thinking about it, her hands coming down to clutch his broad shoulders and twine in his hair. She could feel his fingertips pressing into the meat of her thighs, little burning circles that she just knew she would feel for hours or perhaps days afterward.

When her climax rushed upon her, she tightened her fingers in his hair reflexively, and he growled deep in his chest. That was thrilling, too.

She was still floating somewhere up against the ceiling when Edward pulled back, wiping his chin with his sleeve and breathing heavily. She blinked up at him, watching him watch her. His breath was ragged, even more so now than before, and she could see the way his arousal strained painfully against the front of his breeches.

This was the moment, then. The moment when he'd lower himself again and push himself into her. Daphne would have been lying before if she claimed not to be nervous about this aspect of marriage—like any overly curious unwed lady, she'd heard horror stories about men and wedding nights—but now she found that the idea of it thrilled her more than she could have imagined.

But then, quite abruptly, Edward turned away, climbing off the bed and walking towards the fire.

“You can go now,” he said shortly.

“You can go now,” Edward said, making sure to keep his back turned.

His arousal was painful and had been for a while, but he reminded himself that he was a grown man and could control his base desires just as well as anybody.

There was a rustling behind him, and when he glanced over his shoulder, he could see that Daphne was sitting up on the bed, staring at him, bewildered.

He had to look away. She was so delightfully flushed, so ruffled and wanton and beautiful that if he'd stared at her for too long, he might have pounced on her again. Her nightgown, which he'd pushed up around her waist to bare acres of smooth white flesh, had come down again, hanging around her knees. Perhaps she'd pulled it down, suddenly self-conscious of her nakedness.

“You want me to leave?” she responded at last, her voice a little hoarse. “Why? I thought you were going to... Well, I don't know how you're meant to say it. Finish it all off, I suppose?”

You think I don't dream of finishing with you, wretched girl? You think I won't dream of it tonight? You think I won't dream of you?

Aloud, he only said, “Yes, I think that’s for the best. I’ve done my husbandly duties, have I not? You seemed happy enough. Now I’d like to sleep. We’ve both had a long day. Your maid will come in to wake you in the morning. Her name is Joan, and she tends to panic easily. She’ll worry if you aren’t in bed and probably cry. You can’t sleep here, Daphne.”

He glanced over his shoulder again and saw that the soft look had vanished from her face, replaced by something harder. She scrambled to the edge of the bed, her legs dangling comically high above the floor.

“Very well,” she responded hotly. “I shan’t stay where I’m not welcome.”

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She began hunting around on the floor for her slippers, which had been kicked off at some point. One slipper was under the bed, and she pulled it on, hobbling around in search of the other.

“You say that, and yet...” he murmured, smiling wryly to himself.

She located the other slipper and readjusted her robe around her shoulders. He’d expected her to leave immediately, but she came to stand beside him, glaring up at him until he finally glanced down at her.

“I want to revisit the terms of our marriage,” she said.

“No,” he responded shortly.

She clenched her jaw. “I want a proper marriage. I want you to touch me, talk to me, and spend time with me. I want us to share a bed sometimes. I want us to visit London together. I want aconnection, Edward, and I’m sure that deep down, you feel the same.”

He averted his gaze. “Oh, you’re sure of it, aren’t you? I admire your confidence.”

She sighed, some of her anger fading away. “Think about it, won’t you? Good night, husband.”

Without waiting for a reply, she left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Once she was gone, Edward allowed himself to sag forward, resting his forehead

against the mantelpiece. The fire was dying down.

Edward, you're a fool of the highest order.

Legal issues, indeed.

CHAPTER 18

Daphne had slept poorly. Was it any wonder? She could still remember the moment her stomach dropped, the pleasure from their earlier encounter vanishing entirely.

"You can go now."

That was what he'd said, in the most off-hand, careless way imaginable. As if none of it mattered. As if she didn't matter.

As Daphne dressed for the day, she tried to swallow down the pain. Because it was pain, something she realized with a jolt of misery.

Perhaps I care about him a little more than I originally intended. Perhaps I want him to care about me.

Bother.

She could already see how this was going to be a problem.

A movement outside the window caught her eye, and she peered out to see none other than Edward himself striding briskly across the lawn.

"It's Joan, isn't it?" she asked, directing her question to the maid helping her dress.

The girl beamed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“Well, Joan, would you mind doing me a favor? Might you go down to the stables and let them know that I’ll be going out for a ride later?”

“Of course, Your Grace.” Joan hesitated, glancing out the window. She hid a small smile. “Will His Grace be going with you?”

Daphne bit the inside of her cheek. “I don’t know yet.”

She found Edward shortly after that. He was walking down a narrow path, weaving between two high hedges. His arms were tucked behind his back, and he was frowning, lost in thought. He was looking at nothing in particular.

She had to hurry to catch up with him.

“Edward, wait!”

He turned, and she had the satisfaction of seeing genuine surprise on his face.

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“Daphne, what are you doing out here at this hour? Why aren’t you at breakfast?”

“This is my house, too, now,” she puffed. “I saw you, and I wanted to talk.”

He sighed. “And why did you want to talk to me, Daphne? If you wish to discuss the events of last night?—”

“And what else do you think I’d want to discuss?” she snapped. “I truly cannot make you out, Edward. One moment you act as if you cannot control yourself around me, the next you act as though you cannot stand me.”

He gave a huff of annoyance. “I do not ever act as though I cannot stand you. That is unfair, Daphne. Have I ever been cruel or given you real grounds to resent me? I have tried my best to oblige you where I can.”

She bit her lower lip. It was true, he hadn’t exactly beencruel, although it was rapidly getting tiresome to try and work out his true motivations. The desire she’d seen in his eyes had been real, but then it seemed to vanish as soon as she reached out to touch him back.

Am I doing something wrong?

Daphne felt a flicker of unease. She’d considered this before, of course. She’d never been intimate with a man, naturally, and there might be unspoken rules she was ignoring.

In short, there might be a number of things she was doing wrong while remaining

blissfully unaware of her mistakes. Should she have insisted on Edward taking his pleasure, too? He hadn't seemed inclined to do so—or so she'd thought. Surely he would know that she had no experience at all in such matters.

Stop it. If I am doing something wrong, then I cannot possibly think what it might be. It is up to him to tell me.

“You are not cruel,” she said.

Edward shot her a quick, sideways glance but said nothing. The path widened, and at least Daphne could walk alongside him, instead of scurrying behind.

“I'm sorry if I made you think so,” she added. “But really, you cannot blame me for being confused.”

He sighed. “No, I suppose I cannot.”

“Did you think any more about what I said? About...” She paused, swallowing and praying that she would not blush too intensely. “About last night.”

A muscle tensed in his jaw. “Regarding which aspect?”

“I want a connection, a proper marriage, at least in some respects. I wanted to renegotiate our rules.”

He didn't look at her, and Daphne guessed that he could remember all too well. He trudged on for a moment in silence, his jaw set.

“No,” he said, at last.

Daphne waited for more, but that was it. That was all he had to say. Just no.

A flicker of anger surged up inside her. How dare he? How dare he dismiss her feelings and her carefully worded requests? She wasn't being too demanding, nor was she suggesting they entirely scrap the previously agreed-upon rules. She would still not interfere in Alex's upbringing and would keep her interference in Edward's life to a minimum.

Why must he keep me at a distance? And, if he must stay away from me, why can't he be consistent about it?

"Why not?" she burst out before she could stop herself.

Edward sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. For the first time, she noticed how tired he looked. He was pale, with circular purplish smudges under his eyes.

"I'm afraid it's a question of practicality," he said, shrugging. "It's to keep you safe. I can't alter my conditions—they're there to protect you."

"Ha!" Daphne burst out, louder than she'd intended.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, clearly annoyed. "What is so very amusing?"

She hurried ahead of him, turning so that she blocked his path, forcing him to look at her.

"I haven't the faintest clue what you want from me," she said, looking him dead in the eye. "And frankly, I don't believe that you do, either. I am entirely fed up with you. You say these conditions are for my protection. Well, it's quite apparent to me that these conditions are not for me, not one bit. They are there to protect you."

He blanched, opening his mouth to speak.

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Daphne felt as though she'd heard quite enough, so she stormed past him and back along the pathway.

"I'm going for a ride," she called over her shoulder, not looking back. "If you'd like to discuss this further, feel free to join me."

He said nothing, and soon Daphne had left him far behind.

She had gone a little way out of the stables, trotting up the hill towards the folly where she had first met Alex, when the sound of hoofbeats echoed behind her.

Heart clenching in hope, she twisted around in the saddle.

Her hopes were immediately dashed. Her heart sank, and then she felt guilty for reacting in that way. Because it was Alex, his little face beaming, bouncing up in the saddle and riding towards her. He was followed at a distance by an elderly groom, puffing up the hill after him.

"Joan told me you were going out for a ride with Papa," Alex explained, pulling alongside her. "I thought I would come with you. That's all right, isn't it?"

She smiled down at him. "Of course it is, Alex."

He paused, glancing around. "Where's Papa?"

"He's not coming, I'm afraid. But perhaps he'll join us another time."

Alex seemed crestfallen. “I hope so. I didn’t see very much of Papa yesterday. Did he enjoy himself, do you think? Mrs. Trench said that on their wedding day, a bride and groom find themselves very busy and might not enjoy themselves too much. It seems unfair that Papa would not have a good time.”

“I’m sure he managed quite well, Alex. It was a busy day, but it’s over now, so we can take a breath and concentrate on the life ahead of us. What about you, Alex? Did you enjoy the wedding?”

Judging by the way Alex’s face lit up, he had enjoyed himself a great deal. He broke into chatter, talking about who he’d talked to, which ladies he had danced with—turned out he was quite popular, and something of a darling amongst the women—and what he had eaten.

A great deal of most things, it seemed.

“I fell asleep directly when I finally went up to bed,” Alex said, sighing in satisfaction. “Mrs. Trench said she’ll talk to Papa again about getting a dancing master for me. She said that perhaps you might want to talk to him about it, too, what with you being the Duchess and all.”

“I’ll do what I can, Alex, but I’m afraid that would go against the rules.”

Alex frowned. “Rules?”

Daphne cursed herself for being so careless. How could she explain to the child that she was not really his father’s wife?

“Well, I’ve only just now joined your family,” she explained, “so your papa doesn’t want your stepmother to take over your upbringing... yet. He wants to raise you himself, you see?”

Alex did not seem happy with this. “You don’t seem like a stepmother,” he muttered. “I like you a great deal, Daffie.”

She reached out, taking his hand. It was a stretch, what with them both being on horseback, but she managed it.

“And I like you too, Alex. You mustn’t think otherwise. I’m thrilled to be your mama, and I hope now that we can all be a family. That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

Alex’s taut, little face relaxed into a smile. “Yes, I’d like that.”

By this point, they had reached the top of the hill, the folly just a little way along the ridge. They stopped, their horses standing shoulder to shoulder, and took in the view. The poor groom was still puffing below, at least halfway down the hill.

“That was where I first met you, do you remember?” Alex said, pointing to the folly.

Daphne smiled to herself. “Yes, I remember. It feels so long ago, doesn’t it?”

“I’m glad you stayed,” Alex admitted. “I like you being here, Daffie. You make the house happy.”

She bit her lip, a lump forming in her throat.

Just say it, Daphne. Just say that you’re glad you stayed, too.

Would it be a lie?

I don't know anymore.

Fortunately, Alex seemed to have taken it for granted that she would agree with him. He glanced around, his gaze landing on the steep slope of the hill on the other side, flattening out into a smooth field. A tree trunk lay near the bottom of the hill, smooth and thick and begging to be jumped over.

Apparently, Alex thought the same thing.

"I bet I could jump over that," he said, pointing at the trunk.

Daphne smiled to herself. "I bet you could. You'd better not, though. Your papa might worry."

Alex wrinkled his nose. "He wouldn't have to know."

"Best to obey him, though, even if he's not here," Daphne said, patting his hand. "I tell you what, though—we could have a race."

Alex's face lit up. "A race? You and me?"

"Yes, you and me. The first one to the bottom of the hill wins, yes?"

He beamed, gathering the reins in his hands. "I'll win for sure. And you better not let me win, because then it won't count!"

Daphne laughed. "I have a very competitive older sister, as well as a competitive

twin. Ineverlet anyone win.”

Alex grinned. “We shall see.”

“On my count, then. One... two... three... go!”

The horses leaped excitedly forward.

Daphne’s breath was stolen from her in a rush, her hair whipping backward from her shoulders and streaming out behind her like a banner. She leaned forward over the horse’s neck, the reins gathered in her hands, her legs pressed against the creature’s flanks.

I’d forgotten how marvelous it is to ride, to reallyride.

Cold air scraped down her throat and burned her lungs, needling away at any exposed flesh. It might have been cold if it wasn’t for her blood pumping so energetically, keeping her warm, sizzling underneath her skin.

Her worries fled away as if she’d left them at the top of the hill. Their speed was doubled on account of going downhill, or so it felt.

Alex, it turned out, was an excellent rider. His horse was neck-and-neck with Daphne’s, the creatures sweating, heads bobbing, each one trying to get the advantage. A quick sideways glance—that was all Daphne dared to risk—showed her that Alex wassmiling from ear to ear, clearly having the time of his life. He was sitting easily in his saddle, and it occurred to her that when he became an adult, he’d most likely be the best rider in the country. A flush of pride swept through her, even though he was not herson, even though she barely knew him.

He’s going to do wonderful things. And I’m going to help him do them.

As the slope began to even out, about a third of the way down, Daphne began to pull ahead, ever so slightly. She didn't mean to, it just seemed to be happening. Her horse was a little bigger than Alex's and had a longer stride. The ground became a little rockier and less even, and Daphne felt a flash of fear that one of them would stumble. A fissure in the ground caused the two of them to part, Alex going to the left and Daphne to the right. She put on a burst of speed, concentrating more on the ground now than before.

The ground evened out... she'd made it. With a sigh of relief, she reined in her horse and turned around to see where Alex was.

He was still a little way up the hill, forced to slow down to pick his way across unforgiving terrain.

Sensible boy.

"I won, but we'll have a rematch soon," she called. "It was just bad luck for you. Otherwise, I think you might have won."

"Never mind that," Alex called back, grinning. "Watch this, Daffie!"

He spurred his horse onwards, leaning forward over the saddle, and Daphne frowned.

"What am I watching? What are you..." she trailed off as she saw it.

The fallen log lay in Alex's path, between her and him, and he was riding straight towards it with determination.

He's going to jump.

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Close up, the log was much larger than it had seemed from the top of the hill. It was vast, chest high to a man at least, and irregularly shaped. A difficult jump for a horse to make, and a dangerous one at that.

“No!” she screamed, waving her arms. “Alex, no! It’s too dangerous!”

Perhaps he didn’t hear her, or perhaps he didn’t listen. Either way, Alex and his horse thundered towards the log, not slowing down at all.

Alex’s face was a mask of determination and fear, and for one wild moment, Daphne thought that he might make it after all.

He didn’t.

The horse balked, tossing its head and pressing its ears back against its skull. It reared back on its hind legs in an attempt to save them both. Its hooves slipped in treacherous mud, and they went down sideways.

Daphne was perfectly placed to see the absolute fear on Alex’s face before he fell off the saddle—a tiny, helpless figure. The horse screamed, its hooves windmilling.

Alex gave a shrill scream too, hastily smothered, and then there was silence.

“Alex!” Daphne shrieked, flinging herself down from the saddle.

There was no response.

Feet slipping in the mud, she began to run.

“A doctor!” she shouted at the groom, who had just appeared at the top of the hill.
“Fetch a doctor, now!”

CHAPTER 19

Edward ran, his lungs burning, his newly polished Hessians digging deep into the mud.

Peter Tinn ran at his side, wheezing for breath. The groom who’d seen the accident had been sent to fetch a doctor at once, and they could only pray that it wasn’t too late.

Please, no. Not my son. Please, not my son.

Edward reached the top of the hill first, breathing heavily, and looked down at the scene below.

There, as the groom had described, lay a huge log at the bottom of the hill. It was not a jump that Alex would have ever been able to make, for certain.

A pair of horses stood side by side. The mud-smeared flanks of the smaller one marked it as Alex’s mount, and it was otherwise unharmed.

He couldn’t see Alex at first.

Daphne knelt on the ground beside the fallen log, her muddied skirts fanned out, her dark hair escaping from its braid and hanging around her shoulders like a curtain. She was leaning over a small figure on the ground.

Alex was not moving, and fear surged up Edward's throat, hot and scratchy as bile. He felt ill.

Peter puffed up alongside him.

"Oh, heavens," he rasped. "Did he try to make that jump?"

Edward didn't answer. He began to run down the hill, struggling to keep his balance but refusing to slow down for anything.

Daphne didn't even glance up as he approached.

"Is the doctor coming?" she gasped, and he noticed tear streaks on her face. "I wouldn't let him move, just in case."

Alex was very pale and small in the mud, his face tight with pain. He held his right arm stiffly across his body, cradling his elbow with his other hand. He opened his eyes as his father approached, and Edward almost cried out with relief.

"Alex?" he managed, his voice scratchy. "Alex, are you hurt? Tell me what happened."

"We were racing, and I tried to make the jump," Alex whispered. "I fell."

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Edward dropped onto his knees beside his son. It was too soon to feel relief. A fall from a horse could break a person's back or neck, and they might not realize it until a moment too late.

Alex was blinking up at him, his eyes brimming with tears, and Edward longed to gather him into his arms and reassure him that all was well.

He couldn't, though. Not yet. It was too soon to give in to emotion.

"What hurts, Alex?" he asked bluntly. "Your back? Your neck? Can you move your legs? Is there tingling or numbness or any sort of wrongness in your body?"

Alex swallowed thickly. "There's a lot of wrongness. I feel like one big bruise."

Daphne chuckled at this, and Edward shot her an angry look.

"It's my arm, Papa," Alex continued. "I landed on it when I fell, and it hurts so much."

"Let me see."

Trying to be as gentle as he could, Edward inspected the injured arm, drawing back Alex's sleeve. There was tremendous bruising and swelling, of course, but he could not tell whether it was a broken bone or not.

"The doctor will have to look at it," Edward said. "Now, if you're sure you haven't broken anything else, Alex, we ought to get you up and out of this freezing mud, and

into the warm house. The doctor has been called.”

Alex nodded, sniffing.

As carefully as he could, trying not to jostle the boy’s injured arm, Edward helped Alex to his feet. Once he had reassured himself that neither of Alex’s feet was pointing in the wrong direction, he scooped him up into his arms and began to carry him up the hill.

“Peter, fetch the horses, would you?” he directed. “Duchess, you come with me. I have words I’d like to speak to you.”

The walk back to the house was silent. Inside, the servants were in a frenzy. Mrs. Trench was practically in tears.

“I only turned my back for a moment,” she kept saying, over and over again.

“It wasn’t her fault,” Alex spoke up manfully. “I heard that Daffie was going out for a ride, and I slipped away. I shouldn’t have done it, Papa. I know that.”

“Well, in the future, you must be more careful,” Edward answered grimly. “I know that this was not Mrs. Trench’s fault, but in some households, she might be dismissed for letting her charge sneak away when he is supposed to be studying. And then how would you feel?”

Alex bowed his head at that, looking miserable.

“Don’t you think that’s enough, Edward?” Daphne spoke up, scurrying after him into the house. “He’s already so upset. And Mrs. Trench?—”

Edward rounded on her, his eyes blazing. “Must you interfere in everything, Duchess?

Why do you never listen to me? Please, keep your own counsel. I need to think.”

Turning on his heel, he stormed towards the parlor, which had been set up for Alex to rest and recover while they waited for the doctor.

Daphne did not follow him this time. She lingered in the hallway, pale and a little angry.

That was fine. Edward was angry, too. Livid, in fact.

Mrs. Trench had prepared a couch for Alex, along with hot milk and some bread and jam. Clarissa was there too, plumping up cushions and giving murmured instructions to the maids.

“Your Grace, I can’t apologize enough...” Mrs. Trench began, her face pale with anxiety.

“It’s not your fault, Jemimah,” Edward responded briskly. “The Duchess is to blame for this.”

His words carried. The servants around him flinched, exchanging looks. He knew, without turning to look, that Daphne had heard.

Alex shifted uneasily. “It isn’t Daffie’s fault either, Papa. I asked her if I might make the jump, and she said no. She said that it was too dangerous. She suggested the race instead.”

“A race? Down a steep, dangerous hill, against an eight-year-old boy?” Edward snapped. “If the Duchess had been a little more careful, you would not be lying here with a broken arm. She is to blame for this.”

There was a tense silence after he'd spoken, and then he heard footsteps retreating down the hall.

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Clarissa glided towards him. “Edward, Daphne has gone running upstairs. She seemed upset,” she murmured. “Shall I go after her?”

He sighed. “Do whatever you like, Clarissa. The Duchess will be called down once the doctor arrives.”

Clarissa nodded silently and left the room.

Daphne pressed a hand over her mouth in the hopes of holding back the tears. It did not seem to be working, and hot rivulets trailed over her fingers, dripping off the edge of her chin.

How could I have been so stupid? He blames me. Of course, he does. Well, I think it is my fault.

Oh, I am so very, very stupid.

It was no good.

When she hurried away from the parlor where Alex was being laid out, her first impulse was to run upstairs to her room. It occurred to her at the last minute that that was childish, that she was no longer in her parents’ house, where only one room was hers.

Besides, the library was closer.

She let herself in, sucking in mouthfuls of cool, stale air, and tried to force back tears.

How could she have been so foolish? What grown woman challenged a small boy like Alex to a race? Oh, she was lucky he wasn't in a worse state. It could have been worse. It might still be worse.

She lowered herself shakily onto a lower sofa, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and tried to breathe calmly. She half expected Edward to follow her, to shout at her and berate her for her foolishness.

Oh yes, what a good start, Duchess.

She sagged backward, lying on her back on the sofa.

The library ceiling was high above her, engraved and molded and very pretty, although it was probably thick with dust—not even the longest dusters would reach that high—and never seen by anybody. People tended not to bother looking up, after all.

She flinched when the door opened, half afraid that it would be Edward, and even more afraid that it would not be Edward.

It was not Edward.

Lady Clarissa stood in the doorway, smiling sympathetically down at her.

“Are you all right? Poor thing.” She clucked. “It must have been such a shock for you.”

Daphne gulped audibly. “Truth be told, I... I thought he was dead. He lay so still and quiet. I once heard of a man being crushed by his horse after a failed jump like that, and Alex is so small and fragile. I'm still shaking.”

Clarissa stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. She didn't move to sit next to Daphne, instead choosing to stand and look down at her, her lips pursed.

"It was an accident," she said, as if passing judgment. "Edward is... well, he's rather angry right now, but he'll understand well enough. It wasn't your fault."

Daphne pushed herself up on her elbows, wincing.

"Well, whose fault was it? Nobody else can be blamed but me. I'm a fool, Clarissa."

"You're a young woman who has no experience with children," Clarissa answered firmly. "Alex is old enough to understand the word no, and as I understand, you told him not to jump."

Daphne sighed. "I did. Of course, I did. But children don't listen to what they're told. Especially not eight-year-old boys. I was taking care of him, and he was my responsibility. I am to blame."

Clarissa took a long moment before responding. At last, she sighed and came to sit beside Daphne, prompting her to haul herself into a sharp sitting position.

"He can be harsh, can't he?" she said quietly.

Daphne knew that the woman was not referring to Alex.

"I thought he'd soften," she found herself murmuring, glancing down at the plain gold band around her ring finger. It felt odd, wearing a ring all the time, and she found herself fidgeting with it more often than not, twisting it around her finger. "I thought it was all just for show. A wall, put up to keep intruders out."

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Clarissa considered this. “You could well be right,” she conceded. “But whatever the purpose of the wall, it will take time to come down, don’t you think? If it comes down at all, that is.”

Daphne flinched at this. She had, of course, considered that perhaps the outward facade Edward showed the world was all there was and that she was simply waiting for the appearance of a person who did not exist.

“I understand him being afraid for his son and angry that I might have put him in danger,” she said, her voice wobbling, “but truly, Clarissa, I sometimes think that he hates me. I can do nothing right, and now we are married, and there’s no way for either of us to change our minds about anything.”

She cast a quick glance at the woman, wondering if she’d said too much.

Clarissa did not seem angry or upset, however. She was only staring off thoughtfully into space, a thin line between her eyebrows.

“I know how it can feel,” she said at last, “worrying about one’s children. It can overpower everything else. I remember how I felt about mine, even before she was born.”

Daphne blinked, taking a moment to realize what had been said. “You have a child, Clarissa? I had no idea! A girl, you said? Where is she?”

It was the wrong thing to say.

Clarissa's face crumpled, and she turned away to disguise a rush of emotion.

"My baby died," she said shortly. "I barely even held her. It was sudden. There was no comfort for me. Nothing that could have made it better."

Daphne swallowed hard. "I am so sorry, Clarissa. I... I can't even imagine how that might feel for you."

Clarissa gave a light, one-shouldered shrug. "When I married Edward's father, I thought I might have another chance at motherhood. I had known the late Duchess, you know. We were friends. Our lives were very similar in many respects, except in a few key areas. For example, I lived and my baby died, whereas hers survived and she did not. I thought perhaps I would take her place as Edward's mother, but he never..." she trailed off, and the silence stretched out between them for a few heartbeats.

"He never accepted me fully," she finished. "Edward cares for me, I know that, and he respects me, but he's never forgotten his birth mother. Isn't it ridiculous?" she said, suddenly letting out a bark of laughter that made Daphne jump. "He never even met the woman, and yet he mourns her. That was his father's fault, constantly throwing the Duchess's death in his face."

"It's cruel," Daphne managed, feeling that she had to say something. "He sounds like a cruel man and a bad father."

Clarissa smiled limply. "He was a bad father. And the late Duchess would have been a bad mother, I daresay. She never deserved Edward."

There was another silence, a little grittier this time.

Daphne shifted, beginning to feel uncomfortable. "What do you mean, she didn't

deserve him?”

Clarissa shook her head. “Oh, nothing. Forgive me, I’m reminiscing. I tend to talk about the past for too long. Edward never listens, and Alex is too young. It’s good to find a willing ear.”

Daphne, who would not have described her ears as any variation of willing, gave a wan smile.

“It is a mistake to try and take the place of another in a family in that way,” Clarissa continued after a pause, staring off into the distance again. “I learned that the hard way. Now, forme, there was no question of leaving, of going back to a beloved family home. You could do that, Daphne, if things became too difficult. You have a fine family who would accept you back, and now that you’re married, your reputation is restored. Well, mostly restored, at least.”

Daphne cleared her throat. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable. There was an edge to Clarissa’s voice that made her wonder whether the woman wasn’t simply here to comfort her, but to get some point across.

“I thought that my being here could help,” she heard herself say. “I could make things better between them, maybe convince Edward to?—”

“No,” Clarissa interrupted crisply.

The single word seemed to reverberate through the room, echoing and bouncing off the walls.

Daphne stared at Clarissa, baffled. Clarissa’s expression shifted for a moment, then she broke into a forced smile.

“Forgive me, I’m just... Well, I care so much about them, you know. But you should take my advice, Daphne. Get out while you can. I’m not sure if there’s anything you could do to help.”

Daphne swallowed, trying for a nervous smile.

“Clarissa, you know I am not competing for Edward and Alex’s affection, don’t you? You’re a beloved stepmother and grandmother. I could never take their love from you.”

Clarissa abruptly got to her feet. Perhaps it was Daphne’s imagination, but the temperature in the library seemed to have dropped a chilly ten degrees or so.

“Of course, we are not in competition, Daphne,” she said, laughing. “What a silly idea. What a silly girl you are.”

Daphne flinched. “I beg your pardon?”

“You cannot help them, despite your fine intentions,” Clarissa continued, her cold eyes boring into Daphne’s. “Only I can help them. I have worked to gain their affection and trust for years, and that is that. There is nothing you can do. They are mine, Duchess. Make no mistake about that. You would do well to heed my advice.”

She turned to leave, but then she paused for a moment and glanced over her shoulder.

“I... I’m sorry, Daphne. I don’t mean to be so harsh. I know what you must think of me. You think that I’m an overbearing hag, but I do know what I’m speaking of.”

Daphne cleared her throat, glancing away. “I don’t think you’re a hag.”

Clarissa gave a faint smile. “I don’t want any other woman to live the life I did. I believed that marrying the old Duke would make me happy and that being a mother to his son would give me purpose. I was wrong on both counts.”

Daphne looked up, meeting her eyes. “I’m sorry, Clarissa. That must have been terrible.”

“I endured,” Clarissa responded, straightening her spine. “That’s what we women do, isn’t it? Endure. The truth is, Daphne, they will never accept you as a true member of the family. You will try and try and try, and cut off pieces of yourself to try and fit in, but it will never be enough. They will always require a little bit more until there’s nothing left of you to give. And then, when you can change yourself no further, they will turn their backs on you and speak about what a disappointment you are. That was

what happened to me, Daphne, but I hope it will not happen to you.” She reached out, as if to put a hand on Daphne’s shoulder, but changed her mind at the last moment. “There is still time for you to escape, my dear. Don’t let the chance slip away.”

Without waiting for a reply, Clarissa glided out of the room, leaving Daphne aghast and speechless.

CHAPTER 20

A tap on the door sometime later almost made Daphne jump out of her skin. She bounced to her feet, feeling irrationally guilty, and turned to face the door.

She wasn’t entirely sure how long she’d sat there, mulling over Clarissa’s strange words. Clarissa clearly wanted her gone, and that was no surprise. As far as Daphne could tell, Clarissa had been the only woman in both Edward’s and Alex’s lives for a long time and did not seem to want to give up that position. Especially since Daphne was so popular with Alex.

Was popular, Daphne reminded herself. Alex might not want to see me again.

Peter Tinn stepped into the room. He looked anxious as always but flashed her a reassuring smile.

“Master Alexander is fine,” was the first thing he said. “His arm isn’t even broken. There’s a nasty sprain to his wrist, and a good amount of cuts and bruises, to say nothing of wounded pride. But he’s safe and well, and remarkably lucky. The doctor seems happy enough. He’s asking for you, by the way. Master Alexander, that is, not the doctor.”

It was a frail joke, but Daphne smiled anyway.

Peter hesitated, eyeing her uncertainly. “Are you coming, Your Grace?”

“I am. Just... Just in a minute,” she murmured, not quite meeting his eyes.

There was a pause, then Peter took a careful step forward.

“It wasn’t your fault, you know,” he said quietly and carefully. “It was an accident.”

Daphne shook her head. “I should have been watching him. I should have been careful. What was I thinking?”

“Master Alexander can be very headstrong. From what I understand, he’s much like his father at that age. He’s learned a serious lesson. Until now, he always complained about not being allowed to ride as fast or jump as high as he wanted, and now he knows why care is needed.” Peter shrugged. “It was a valuable lesson, and the cost was not as high as we might have feared. His Grace lashed out at you, I know, but you must see that it’s only because he was so worried about his son. A natural reaction, I’d say.”

Daphne pushed a hand through her hair. It occurred to her then, for the first time, what a sight she must look. Her hair was tangled, hanging over her shoulder, the strip of ribbon used to tie the end of her plait long since gone. There was a splash of dried mud on her cheek, and the hem of her skirts were all but ruined.

“Where is he, then?” she asked. “I’d like to see Alex.”

Alex still lay in the parlor where he’d been placed. Peter led Daphne there, and Alex brightened at once when he saw her.

A roaring fire had been stoked in the hearth, filling the room with heat and light. There was an arrangement of sweets on a table near Alex’s elbow. Marzipan, she

noticed. A fragrant tea steamed quietly beside the marzipan, and somebody had put a handful of toy soldiers there, too. Blankets had been laden over his legs, and Mrs. Trench was assiduously plumping cushions behind his back. A bandage was wound around his forearm and wrist.

“Daffie, there you are!” he exclaimed, sitting upright. “Papa’s just gone to talk to Doctor Seymour, but they both say I’ll be as right as rain in a few days, or a week or so. I’ve only got to keep my hand still, which means no lessons for me for a while, as I can’t hold a pen.”

“Don’t get too comfortable,” Mrs. Trench lectured, ruffling his hair. “I’ll find something educational for you to do.”

He stuck his tongue out at her. Mrs. Trench only smiled, shaking her head.

Peter stood in the doorway, staring at Mrs. Trench with a faintly entranced expression on his face.

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“Shall we give Her Grace a moment with Master Alexander, then, Jemimah?” he asked, a trifle nervously. “You’ve had a shock yourself. I could get a cup of tea for you, perhaps?”

She smiled at him. “Thank you, Peter. That’s kind.”

The two of them shuffled out, talking in low voices.

Daphne sank onto a low stool beside Alex.

“They like each other, you know,” he said confidentially. “Mrs. Trench and Peter. They’re always looking at each other. Did you know that Mrs. Trench isn’t really married? I thought she was, on account of the Mrs., but Papa said not. It’s just a respectful thing, I believe, like calling the housekeeper Mrs. Cobb even though she’s not married, either.”

Daphne smiled at this babble of information.

“I think Peter and Mrs. Trench like each other, too. They suit each other, don’t they? But Mrs. Trench probably cannot marry him. She would have to stop being your governess, and she loves you too much.”

Alex frowned at this. “That’s a great pity. Is there nothing she can do? Can she not get married and keep her job? Men do it, all the time. Why should Mrs. Trench not be allowed?”

Daphne sighed. “That’s an excellent question, Alex. I’m afraid I don’t have the

answer. But enough about all of that—I am here to see you. How are you feeling? Are you in a lot of pain?”

“My arm hurts a little,” Alex confessed. “But Doctor Seymour put a few drops of something in my tea, and now I feel a little better. He said that there might be pain, but I should be careful not to move my arm too much even so. He said I’m very brave, and Papa said that I’m very silly.”

“You are, Alex,” Daphne responded, swallowing hard to choke back tears. “You mustn’t do such a thing again.”

“I bet Papa could have cleared that jump,” Alex muttered mulishly.

“I daresay he could. But I could not, and you are too small. You were lucky because you might have hurt yourself so seriously that you would not have been able to ride again. Alex, you could have died.” She swallowed again, forcing herself to continue. “I thought you were dead, for a minute. Did they tell you that? Your papa thought you were dead. His face was so pale and terrified. You can’t do that again, Alex.”

Alex lowered his head, seeming a little ashamed.

“Doctor Seymour said that I could have died,” he mumbled. “Papa’s face was all tight and funny. I think he’s angry with me.”

“He’s not angry with you. He’s only worried, that’s all. If he’s angry with anyone, it is me.”

Alex’s head snapped up at that. “Angry with you? Why would he be angry with you?”

Daphne immediately regretted saying that. “He’s not angry with me. At least, not

much. But I ought to have been taking care of you. I should have been more diligent. The race... the race was a bad idea, I see that now.”

Alex leaned forward, his face alight. “But I liked the race. I’m tired of being treated like a... like a doll, Daffie! I know I’m too young to do many things, but I can do some things. Mrs. Trench taught me chess so that Papa and I could play, but he never wants to play with me. Mrs. Trench can’t ride, and Peter always lets me win. I like you, Daffie. I don’t even have friends my own age. I liked Aunt Beatrice and Uncle Stephen very much, but now that they’ve... now that they’ve gone home, I’m all alone again.” He sniffed, dropping his head to his chest. “You won’t leave, will you?”

No, of course not, Daphne wanted to say, but the words were stuck in her throat.

“They only want you to be safe,” she said instead. “And you were safe, until me and my stupid race. Life can’t always be about what’s fun, Alex. I should have taken better care of you. It... it is my fault, no matter what anyone says. I’ve never had much to do with children, you know. My sister and I are the youngest. We are the children of the house, and we’ve always been treated as such.”

Did I think that saying a vow and putting on a wedding ring would make me a grown-up?

They’re all right, all of them. Alex could have died because I couldn’t see the danger.

That was a terrifying thought, and it constricted her throat and made her feel dizzy. It was a good thing that she was already sitting down because Daphne worried that she might have collapsed altogether.

A tap at the door made her jump. She spun around to see a kindly, middle-aged man with a pince-nez smiling down at her.

“Your Grace? I am Doctor Seymour.”

“Doctor, it’s a pleasure. Alex is well, I have heard?”

He nodded. “A little rest and care is the thing, and perhaps no more big jumps on horseback for a good long while, hm?”

The doctor aimed his comment at Alex, who flushed and smiled, but Daphne felt as though it was for her—a sharp reproof.

Look at what you’ve done, Your Grace. As if you were worthy of the name. Look at the state of the boy. Look at the state of you. Some duchess you are.

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She had to turn away, smoothing out her expression.

“His Grace is in his study,” Doctor Seymour was saying now. “I plan to make a few last checks of Master Alexander’s health, and then I shall leave. Your Grace, His Grace was asking if you might step in to speak with him.”

“Of course,” Daphne said, turning around with a neat, little smile. “I’ll see you soon, Alex.”

She strode out of the room without looking back.

Edward did not glance up as Daphne stepped into his study. He was opening letters, the silver blade of a letter opener flashing in the sunlight.

“That looks sharp,” she responded, and he glanced up then. “The letter opener, I mean. It has an unusual handle.”

He grunted, eyeing the handle in question. “It’s carved jade. Something my father brought back from his travels. A present to himself. And it is sharp, but don’t worry, I’m careful. Now, Daphne, I summoned you here?—”

“Yes, why did you do that? I’m the Duchess, yet you had the doctor send for me as if I were an errant schoolgirl.” She folded her hands in front of her waist. “I didn’t appreciate that.”

He held her gaze for a long moment, then gave another grunt.

“Very well. I never thought. You have my apologies. And I apologize for how harshly I spoke to you earlier. You were reckless in allowing Alex to race his horse, but I know how stubborn he can be. No doubt you did tell him not to jump, and he ignored you. He’s tried it before, with me. Of course, I was firmer with him.”

He added that last part almost in an undertone. Daphne heard it anyway and bristled accordingly.

“Perhaps if you spent more time with your son, then?—”

“Not this again,” Edward cut her off brusquely, getting to his feet and circling the desk to face her head-on. “I thought this incident would have made it clear. I will raise my son, and I’ll do it without your input if you don’t mind.”

She took a step forward. “But I do mind. And why must you speak to me like this? Truly, Edward, sometimes I feel as though I have married two different men. You can be so... so affectionate, so intimate at times, and?—”

“Let’s not mention those occasions,” Edward interrupted hastily. A flush was creeping across his cheeks.

“But I must bring up those occasions. I... I could think of nothing else but you, Edward! And then you would become a different person. How was I meant to understand?”

She took another step forward, and this time he did not step away. Heat flared through her, and she reached out tentatively, flattening her palm against the warm, rich material of his embroidered waistcoat.

She fancied she could feel his heart thudding under her touch. Edward stared at her, his eyes hungry and desperate.

He must care for me. He must.

Daphne stared at him for a long moment. She hated how she could still feel the pulse of desire going through her. She still wanted to kiss him, to touch him, to be near him. She still wanted him. Another step closer, and she was pressed against him, the wanting building up to an ache she could not ignore.

He dipped his head, his breath becoming ragged, and she tilted up her chin. She could almost taste his lips, warm and soft and aching delicious, and the thrum of desire became unbearable. His hands hovered just over her waist, as if he longed to touch her but did not dare. If she glanced down, she knew she would see that they were shaking.

He wants me, too. I can feel the desire in him, just as strongly as I feel it in me.

“Edward,” she breathed, their lips a hair’s breadth apart. “Edward, I?—”

He pulled back, leaving her bereft and cold all of a sudden.

“That’s enough,” he said, his back turned to her. “Stop it, Daphne. I am asking you to stop. I am not... I am not strong enough.”

Edward’s feelings and wants, it seemed, were just as alien to her as they had been when she first came here. Back still turned, he moved to sit behind his desk again. Perhaps he felt safer with a little space between them.

“I’m never going to get close to you, are you?” she said, half to herself. “I keep thinking that something will change, but it won’t. You won’t change.”

He shuffled papers around on his desk. “I believe I warned you about this when we first agreed to marry. I am not an agreeable man, Daphne. I don’t plan to be cruel,

and I don't plan to ruin your life, but I must be left alone. Why can't you see that?"

She swallowed hard, her gaze wandering over his head to the garden outside. At some point, luncheon had come and gone, and early afternoon light spilled golden over the lawn, the trees swaying in a faint breeze.

"I do see it, now," she said, her voice small. "And I can see that my interference with Alex could have led to a serious accident. I know that it was partially my fault."

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Edward blinked, seeming a little taken aback. “You do?”

“Yes. And don’t worry, I understand now. You’ve built up walls around your mind and heart, and it would take a stronger woman than me to knock them down. I doubt that even Jane managed to do it.”

He bristled. “My marriage to Jane was?—”

“None of my business, yes, I know,” she interrupted, waving her hand dismissively. “You promised me a life as a spinster, and I shall begin on that life at once. Don’t worry, Edward. I shan’t bother you anymore. It’s too tiring.”

He stared at her for a long moment, bafflement clear in his eyes.

“Oh. Well. I’m glad to hear that.”

She nodded and half turned to go. Another thought occurred to her, and she turned back.

“Just promise me that you won’t turn everybody anyway. Clarissa, for instance. She can be strange and far too possessive of you both, but I believe she cares for you. It’s your harsh behavior that pushes her away and makes her cling to you as though she might lose you.”

Edward rose to his feet. “What does Clarissa have to do with this? What are you talking about?”

Daphne sighed, shaking her head. “Nothing, nothing. It’s just... Well, she dislikes me. That is clear.”

“She does not dislike you. She is protective, certainly, but that is not a crime.”

Daphne tilted her head. “You don’t see, do you? I don’t blame you. I don’t blame Clarissa, either. She talked to me today, and I think I saw a different side of her. She’s already lost a child, and now she’s losing you and Alex day by day. That’s because of you, Edward. You are driving her away, and driving her to desperation.” She gave a short laugh, holding out her arms to the sides. “You’re driving us all to desperation.”

“I thought you said you were finished with offering unsolicited advice,” Edward snapped. “You are acting strangely, Daphne. I brought you here to apologize.”

She smiled faintly. “Don’t worry, Edward. This will be the last piece of advice I offer. Oh, except for one.”

“Do tell me,” Edward shot back sarcastically, dropping back into his seat. “I’m keen to hear your wisdom.”

Daphne only sighed. She was tired, a sudden, bone-deep, aching tiredness that made her want to sink to the ground and stay there. Now that her mind was made up, her strength had left her.

“If you won’t go horse riding with your son, Edward, at least play chess with him.”

She left without waiting to hear his reply.

CHAPTER 21

“What do you mean, she isn’t here?” Edward thundered.

He was aware that he was shouting, his voice entirely too loud for the small space. The poor maid, Joan, only flinched and fixed her eyes on the ground.

Father used to shout like this. He had us all cowering in the corners when he was in one of his rages.

An image flashed through his head, of himself trying to hide in a wardrobe, shaking. How old was he? Six? Seven? Younger than Alex. He remembered Clarissa pulling him out of the wardrobe, hustling him along the corridor, and whispering in his ear. Don’t worry, come and sit in my parlor, she would say. He won’t come in there, I bet.

Do I want to be like him?

He cleared his throat, deliberately forcing his voice down to a normal volume.

“Forgive me, Joan, I should not have shouted. Only, I don’t quite understand. You say that the Duchess has gone out? Where? It’s dark, and supper is on the table.”

Joan twisted her apron between her hands. “She made me promise not to tell you until you asked, Your Grace. And when I helped her pack, I kept saying?”

“Wait. Pack?”

Joan swallowed audibly and nodded. “There’s a letter, too, Your Grace. She slipped it into your study right before the carriage was called. Told me to tell you that it would be there. You weren’t in at the time, on account of playing chess with Master Alexander. Her Grace seemed pleased to hear that you were doing that.”

Edward raked a hand through his hair and was horrified to find that his hand was

shaking.

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“Am I in trouble, Your Grace?” Joan ventured, glancing briefly up.

“What? No, no, of course not, Joan. You were being loyal to your mistress, although I wish you could have mentioned it to me.”

“She specifically told me not to, Your Grace.”

“Of course. Of course. Well, why don’t you sit here with Alex? If Daphne isn’t coming down to supper, I might as well take my meal with him.”

Joan paused. “Will Lady Clarissa eat alone, then?”

Edward felt a wave of guilt so intense that it made him swallow. How could he have forgotten about her? Did he really take her for granted so often?

“We shall invite Lady Clarissa to eat with us in here,” he said. “Excuse me, Joan.”

He pushed past the hapless maid and strode away down the corridor.

It was dark and notably cold after the warmth of Alex’s little parlor. He had been a little shocked to discover that his son not only knew how to play chess but was also good at it. Worryingly good.

“I hope you aren’t letting me win, Papa,” Alex had said, narrowing his eyes at him.

Edward had grimaced. “Don’t worry, son. I’m not.”

She's sulking, that's all. She's gone to clear her head. She'll be back when she decides to forgive me.

She will forgive me, won't she?

He burst into his study and saw the letter at once. It sat in the middle of the table, weighed down with the jade-handled letter opener. Snatching it up, he tore it open and began to read.

Edward,

I'm writing this letter in a hurry. You'll know by now that I have packed up my things and taken the carriage. I won't tell you where I am going, although I'm sure you can guess easily enough. I intend to live life as a spinster, as you always wished, and it seemed expedient to take myself away.

You see, I won't be able to stay with you and keep my opinions to myself. I feel that you are doing many things wrong in raising your son and living your life, and while I don't intend to criticize, I can see how you might think of it that way. I promised no more advice, so I shan't give any, only that I hope you'll listen to Lady Clarissa, and Peter and Mrs. Trench, and that you'll try and pay attention to what Alex wants.

I hope he recovers well, and if you remember, do write me a few brief notes about his recovery.

My only regret is leaving without saying goodbye to Alex. I know it was cowardly, but I couldn't face him. He would be better off without me, I think, as will you. Besides, you were in there with him, playing chess, and I thought you might have tried to prevent me from leaving. Tell him, if you will, that I care about him and I'm sorry for everything. It's all a mess, and I kept thinking that I could tidy it all up if only I tried hard enough.

I like to fix things, you see. I did it with my sister, taking her place at the altar, and we all know how that turned out. I don't think I can fix you, Edward, because you do not wish to be fixed. And besides, it's none of my business.

Anyway, I'm rambling. This was only meant to be a short note, can you believe it? I'm sure you'll consider yourself well rid of me. Perhaps our paths will cross again, or perhaps they won't. Either way, Edward, I think this is goodbye. There's a virtue in knowing when to give up, after all.

Daphne.

Edward read the whole letter again as if there might have been some sentences he'd overlooked, as if he'd somehow misinterpreted the whole thing.

He hadn't.

He sat down with a thump, crumpling the letter in his hand.

She's gone. She's left me. Gone to her mother's or her sister's house. I won't be welcome there, for sure. She hasn't forgiven me. I went too far.

How am I going to tell Alex?

A throat was cleared in the doorway, and he flinched, glancing over to see a pale Joan watching him.

"Lady Clarissa is asking for you, Your Grace," she whispered. "Supper is getting cold. When is the Duchess coming home?"

Edward closed his eyes. "She isn't."

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Octavia Belmont, known to many as the Dowager Viscountess St. Maur, sighed in satisfaction and propped her feet up on the fender.

Outside, darkness was crowding in, a flutter of rain idly hitting the windowpane. It was good to be home.

The Duke of Thornbridge's vast house was nice enough, but really, once a woman got to a certain age, there was no place like home. There was also a certain comfort in knowing that two out of her three daughters were well-married. Todukes, no less.

Not bad for a trio of girls with no money and the reputation for leaving and being left at the altar.

They were rich now, thanks to Anna's marriage, and now with two duchesses as her sisters, Emily would be a highly sought-after lady.

But then was she free to marry? Octavia wasn't sure. Emily hadn't explained just what had gone on with that wretched Duke of Clapton. It was clear that some force was compelling the girl down the aisle for starters, but the twins had been uncharacteristically troublesome and had told neither their mother nor sister what was going on.

She sighed.

They're too insular, those girls.

Blackmail was the obvious thing, but what could Emily possibly be blackmailed

about? And why would a man like the Duke need to blackmail his wife? And why Emily, in particular?

At least the Duke of Thornbridge's motivations for marrying Daphne were reasonably straightforward. He was compromised, she was compromised, and they had to marry. That was that.

Is that a good thing? What if he despises her?

Octavia shifted again, a pang of guilt returning. She had intended to tell Daphne that she could live in disgrace if she couldn't bear to marry the Duke, but really, she had been so relieved when the offer was not accepted. It hardly mattered now. The wedding had happened, it was official, and that was that. Daphne was married. She was no longer Miss Belmont. She was the Duchess of Thornbridge.

No longer my little girl.

That was an upsetting thought. Octavia glanced across at her other daughter, the only one remaining at home.

The four of them had once made the little parlor seem overfull, but now with just her and Emily, there seemed to be more space than she had imagined.

Emily was reading, of course, the firelight glinting off her round spectacles. Sensing eyes on her, she glanced up and gave a smile.

"What's wrong, Mama?"

"Nothing, nothing," Octavia murmured. "I was only thinking about how quickly children grow up."

“Well, I suppose that’s natural.”

I was also thinking about why you won’t tell me what exactly is going on with you and the Duke of Clapton. There’s no talk of an engagement. Is he too humiliated to try again? I’m not sure I want to wrangle a duke with a grudge. I’m too old for this nonsense.

“Emily,” Octavia said, as firmly as she could imagine. “Emily, it’s time for us to talk.”

“Oh?” Emily did not look up.

“Put that book away, dear. Now, you and the Duke...”

Emily’s head shot up.

Aha! Octavia felt a flare of triumph. We’re getting somewhere.

“Yes, I wanted to ask?—”

“Mama, hush.”

Octavia choked faintly. “Don’t you tell me to hush!”

“No, Mama, can’t you hear that? Carriage wheels outside, coming up the drive.”

Octavia paused, and then she heard it too. Gravel crunched, and a horse whinnied. Both of them were on their feet immediately, rushing over to the window. Their breaths fogged up the glass, but Octavia spotted the blocky shape of the coach, slick with rain.

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“It’s the Duke of Thornbridge’s crest on the side,” Emily said, her voice grim. “This must have something to do with Daphne.”

Octavia’s heart plummeted, and a cold shiver rolled over her body.

No. Not my baby girl. I lost my husband, but my daughters... No, I can’t lose them.

She pried herself away from the window, throwing her dignity to the wind and hiking up her skirts to run downstairs and across the hallway, her heart pounding.

“The door! Open the door!” she shouted at the hapless night footman. The poor man barely got there before she did.

Octavia rushed out into the night, cold air and rain nipping her skin.

“What news?” she shouted at the driver. “What’s happened? Tell me quickly, man!”

She heard the patter of footsteps behind her and knew that Emily was hurrying down, too.

The wretched coachman only looked at her, perplexed, and reined in the horses.

For the first time, Octavia noticed that there were a few bags and boxes lashed to the roof.

Then, the door opened, and Daphne herself stepped out, swathed in a traveling cloak. She was white and pale, and she clutched at the door as if for support.

Octavia gave a cry and hurried down the slippery front steps.

“Daphne, my girl, what were you thinking about, traveling at this time of night? The Duke doesn’t know about it, I bet.”

“He will know soon enough,” Daphne responded listlessly.

Her hand, when Octavia took it, was limp and icy cold. Clenching her jaw tightly, Octavia pushed away her worries and questions and concentrated on what she was good at—arranging things.

“You, take down these boxes, please,” she instructed the footman. “Ask the housekeeper to take them up to Miss Bel—that is, the Duchess’s old room. Get the coachman something to eat and drink, before he returns.” She helped Daphne up the steps and caught Emily’s eye. “Emmie, go and order tea. Hot tea, perhaps a little cake, and something savory and refreshing. Have a hot bath set up in Daphne’s old room. We can talk to her and drink tea while it is being readied. Yes?”

There was a brief silence, and Octavia clapped her hands.

“Go!”

They went.

After ten minutes or so in front of the fire, Daphne appeared to warm up a little. The color returned to her cheeks, and her hands felt less like blocks of ice.

“It was so cold in the carriage,” she murmured. “I only took my cloak—no rugs or blankets or anything. I didn’t even bring my gloves. That is, I did bring them, but they’re packed.”

Octavia exchanged a glance with Emily, who was pouring the tea.

“You said that the Duke would know soon enough that you’d gone,” Octavia said carefully. “My darling girl, has he hurt you?”

Daphne shook her head. “He’s not cruel. He’s fairly kind. I... I even thought I might like him. But he’s cold, Mama. I cannot live with him, not like this. And he wants me to go. He said I should expect a spinsterish life.”

Octavia pressed her lips together. A spinsterish life as a married woman meant no children, she guessed. No warmth, no romance, and, of course, none of the other business. It was an arrangement that suited some women and men, and if so, that was well enough.

She might have guessed that it would not suit her hot-blooded daughter, however.

“Things came to a head after the little boy had an accident,” Daphne continued, staring down at her hands and flexing her fingers. “He’s well, don’t worry, but it was my fault. I realized that my interference was not making things better. Edward did not want me there. He never did. I didn’t want to marry him, but I thought...” she trailed off, shrugging her shoulders. “I don’t know what I thought.”

“And you had this arrangement in place before the wedding?” Emily asked, with a little more curiosity than was seemly.

Daphne avoided their eyes. “Yes,” she responded staunchly. “I agreed to it. But when I wished to negotiate, he did not.”

“Well, he’ll be sorry,” Octavia promised. “We’ll... we’ll sue him for something or other. Defamation, perhaps? No, that won’t stick. Breach of promise? Perhaps?—”

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“It’s lawful for a man to send his wife away,” Emily interrupted. “Even a duchess.”

Daphne flushed. “He didn’t send me away. I left of my own accord. As I said, he wasn’t cruel to me, or even very unkind. He just... just wasn’t who I wanted him to be. And that’s not fair, is it? For me to want him to be somebody other than who he is?”

Octavia swallowed hard. Emily, she knew, would have nothing to offer here. How could she? Octavia was the mother, the one with life experience, the one who her girls thought had all the answers.

No answers were forthcoming.

Daphne’s face crumpled, and tears leaked out, and Octavia’s heart felt as though it were breaking.

“I’m so sorry, my poor girl,” Octavia murmured, putting an arm around Daphne’s shoulders and pulling her close. “Men can be disappointing, it’s true. But you are safe here, you know that. You always will be.”

“It’s so unfair, Mama,” Daphne wailed. “I know I sound like a child, but I can’t help it. I liked him, Mama. I think I could have loved him.”

There was nothing to say to that.

Octavia held her daughter tightly and let her cry.

CHAPTER 22

Edward lay on his back on the floor of his study, staring up at the ceiling. There was a cobweb up there. He could see it drifting back and forward in an unseen, unfelt breeze.

It wasn't the maids' fault, of course. Such a thing was easy to miss, and who was to even say whether their dusters could reach it?

It was strange how one never noticed things like this. Unless, of course, one looked up.

I don't spend a lot of time looking up, it seems.

Early morning sunlight streamed in through the window, a square of yellow light warming his lower half. As the morning progressed, the light would creep upwards and upwards until it shone full on his face, blinding him.

He still had the letter, crumpled in his fist, which rested on his sternum. So far, no ideas had been presented themselves. His wife had gone, left him. The driver had returned, confirming that he had dropped the Duchess off at her mother's house.

"She was in a state, Your Grace," he added, casting a nervous glance at his master. "I hope she is well."

Edward hadn't answered. It wasn't as if he knew himself, was it?

Part of him had expected something else. A note, perhaps. Something to let him know she was home.

And then what? Something to tell him that she would not be coming back? An

accusation? An expression of defiance? An apology? An offer to make amends?

Oh, he didn't know what he expected. Not this echoing, resounding silence.

But then what more do I deserve? This is all my fault.

He closed his eyes, tightening his fist around the letter.

I kissed her. I touched her and acted as though she meant something to me.

He closed his eyes, imagining her. The vision came almost immediately, of the two of them in this very room, Daphne's hand on his chest, the warmth of her fingers driving him wild. He could feel the arousal thudding inside him as if he were there, as if she were there. He'd seen the heat and longing in her eyes too as she stretched up to kiss him.

He could have kissed her. It would have been the easiest thing in the world. He could have kissed her, pressed his lips to the pulsing vein in her neck, unlaced her gown and pushed it down her shoulders to expose the creamy swell of her breasts, and kissed her there, too. He could have done all of that.

But what had he done instead? He had turned his back. He had told her to stop. He told himself that she meant nothing to him, but the words had begun to ring hollow, like an overplayed tune full of wrong notes.

Because, you fool, she does mean something to you.

He wasn't ready to consider this. Why couldn't they have an easy, simple marriage, like the one he and Jane had? There'd been no talk of love there, no twilight kissing in a pond, none of the feelings that plagued him since wretched Daphne Belmont had crossed his threshold. Jane was more than happy for them to live separate lives, once

they had an heir.

But Daphne isn't Jane. They're entirely different people.

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For a moment, he could imagine his first wife sitting at his desk, an amused smile on her face.

“You’re a fool, my friend,” she would say. “Here you are, pretending you don’t love the woman. Here you are, wasting time lying on the ground like a child. What on earth are you waiting for? Not for my sake, I should hope. Itold you to go off and be happy, did I not? Heavens, you are infuriating at times.”

He groaned aloud. “Stop making fun of me, Jane.”

Her voice echoed in his head this time. She loves you. And Heaven knows you love her.

“She doesn’t love me,” he said bitterly. “How could she?”

The door creaked open, and he tilted his head back to see who was there. An upside-down version of Clarissa stood there.

“Who are you talking to?” she asked, baffled.

“Nobody. Myself. What is it?”

She stepped inside, closing the door behind her, and folded her hands demurely in front of herself.

“I heard the news, of course. The new Duchess has taken herself to her mother’s house, like a sulking child. It’s rather shocking, I must say.”

“It’s my fault,” he responded, hauling himself up into a sitting position. “I drove her away with my coldness and my unkindness. It’s my fault.”

The words echoed blankly in his head. The realization was beginning to sink in. A man whose wife had abandoned him with something of a pitiable spectacle, somebody who would hear whispers spring up as he went by, the recipient of meaningful stares and sympathetic smiles.

I should be used to that already. How could I have made such a mess of my life already?

She wanted me. I know she did. And yet I drove her off.

He gave his head a tight shake, pushing himself to his feet. His back ached from lying motionless for so long, and pins and needles shot down on his limbs.

Clarissa watched him, anxiety written all over her face.

“You haven’t had breakfast,” she noted. As if that mattered.

“I’m not hungry. Does Alex know? Everyone else seems to, and I’d hate for him to find out from somebody else.”

She sighed. “He asked about Daphne this morning. Mrs. Trench knows, as well as the servants, but we thought it was best to keep it from him, for now. Mrs. Trench is keeping an eye on him, and nobody will tell him without our permission. But he must be told soon, Edward. Sooner rather than later.”

“It’ll hurt him badly, knowing that she left without saying goodbye.”

He saw the annoyance flash across his stepmother’s face, hastily swept away.

“He’s a child,” she responded firmly. “He’ll get over it quickly. Don’t I always know what’s best for you?”

Edward swallowed hard, leaning against the edge of his desk. At some point, Peter had come in and placed a stack of correspondence on his desk, probably in the hope of distracting him. It hadn’t worked. The jade-handled letter opener rested on top of the stack.

“You’re good to us, Clarissa,” Edward murmured, avoiding her gaze. “And I’m not always grateful.”

Clarissa shuffled closer, smiling. “I don’t take care of you both forgratitude, Edward. I care about you, you know that.”

Somewhat hesitantly, she lifted her hand to his face, patting his cheek. He closed his eyes, leaning into the touch.

“You... you told her about the baby you had. The one you lost. You never talk to me about that, Clarissa.”

The words came out almost unbidden, and he sensed her stiffening.

“It was so long ago,” she answered shortly. “I never had my own child, but I hadyou, Edward. It doesn’t matter.”

“But—”

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“I don’t like to talk about it, you know that. I only told her in the hope of making her see her duty, of making her care.” She sighed, shrugging her shoulders. “It didn’t work, I suppose. But that doesn’t matter, Edward. She wasn’t worthy of you, and that’s that.”

He opened his eyes, frowning. “Unworthy? She isn’t unworthy. I... I cared about her, Clarissa.”

Clarissa’s mouth tightened. “Well, clearly your feelings were not reciprocated. If they had been, if she had been worthy, she wouldn’t have left, would she? For all her words about caring for you and Alex, she isn’t here, is she? What mother—even a stepmother—could leave a child behind?”

Edward shook his head, pushing away from the desk and turning his back to Clarissa. His legs still felt like jelly, and he braced himself against the mantelpiece, staring down into the empty grate.

“I’ve ruined everything,” he murmured, his voice barely louder than a breath. “How could I have made such a fool of myself? And of her, too. Of Daphne. I drove her away from the place that should have been her new home. She should have felt safe and happy here, but all I offered her was coldness and a sense that she was not welcome.”

Clarissa sucked in a breath. “She was not welcome, Edward! Or have you forgotten? She planned this. She came here to trap you into marriage. This was her doing.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “You know that’s not true, Clarissa. The whole business

was an accident. Rather a funny one, I suppose, to an onlooker. It was as if the fates conspired to bring us together. If I believed in such things, of course. But then why should I not believe? The curse, after all, is very real. It killed my mother, and my wife, and drove away the woman I loved. I'd be a fool to believe that I was not cursed."

There was a long silence after that, long enough that Edward began to believe that his stepmother must have tiptoed noiselessly out of the room. When he turned to look behind him, however, she was still standing there, bone-white, her hands interlocked tightly together.

"You are not cursed," she managed. "Your wife... that is, Jane, was small and frail. The midwives were concerned about the birth even before the baby came. She was unlucky, Edward. You both were. Jane knew the risks. She knew that she was not built for childbirth. But she did not care. You know how excited she was about the baby."

He shook his head. "And what about my mother, then? What about her death? It was so sudden. Nobody expected that."

"Edward—"

"Leave me, Clarissa, please. I'd rather be alone."

She let out a frustrated sigh. "You've been alone a great deal until now, Edward. And do not dismiss me so brusquely. I am your mother, after all."

"You are not my mother."

He immediately regretted the words.

Clarissa rocked back on her heels, clearly taken aback. Guilt rushed through him like a river, and he took a step forward, taking her hand in his.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice quiet. “I should not be so sharp. You know me, Clarissa. My tongue runs away with me if I let it. The words spill out if I don’t keep my mouth shut. They did with Daphne, and now she’s left me. Forgive me, please.”

She bit her lip, glancing away. “You are forgiven, Edward. You’re always forgiven. I can deny you nothing. I... I’ll even write to Lady St. Maur if you like, and demand that she send her daughter back.”

He shook his head. “No, Clarissa. I won’t have my wife dragged back. If she chooses to leave me, she can do so.”

“But she is humiliating you by being undutiful?—”

“She married me out of duty,” he interrupted. “She is a kind and dutiful woman, I know that. She was willing to marry an odious stranger to save her sister. She is full of love and forgiveness, and if I have gone through her store of patience and compassion, then that is my fault and mine alone.”

“I can have her fetched back,” Clarissa persisted. “As her husband, you have the right to?—”

“To what?” he said, with a short laugh. “I promised her she could live as a spinster. I can’t exactly go back on my word now. If she chooses to leave, that is her business. I will give her an allowance, and a house, perhaps.” He swallowed hard, tilting up his chin. “I hope she’ll agree to see Alex occasionally. He does adore her.”

Clarissa stared up at him, a frown marring her brow.

“Well, if you don’t want her back, then so much the better,” she said, at last.

You have no idea. I want her back. I want her back so badly that it hurts. If I think of her for too long, I ache. I want to hold her, touch her. Even being around her would be enough for me.

Unfortunately, I have ruined all of it for myself. And for Alex, too.

I truly am the worst father in the world. My father might have been a cruel wretch who resented me for taking away his wife, but at least he didn’t separate me from Clarissa.

Edward crossed the room to where the whiskey decanter sat on the side. He was faintly aware that he had been drinking too much lately, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to care. He poured a glass and threw it back, barely tasting the liquid as it burned down his throat.

“Perhaps it’s for the best,” he said aloud, pouring himself another glass. “After all, I killed my own mother just to start living. What sort of start is that? No wonder I’m cursed.”

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Clarissa let out an anguished groan. “Don’t say such things! She didn’t deserve you, Edward! She never did.”

She began to pace up and down, muttering under her breath. She didn’t look at him.

He paused, the glass halfway to his lips. “What do you mean? When you say she didn’t deserve me, do you mean Daphne?”

Clarissa shook her head—a short, irritated gesture. “What? No, no. Your mother.”

He set down the glass with a clink.

“I don’t understand,” Edward said, choosing his words carefully. “You said my mother didn’t deserve me. Why? What had she done?”

Clarissa let out a short, mirthless laugh. “Oh, Edward, you have no idea. You know that your mother and I were friends, didn’t you? We were close friends, once. We both wanted the Duke when he came to choose a wife. Both equal in looks and accomplishments, we were. I had more money, but she had a title. And breeding, of course. As if anybody could have any control over that.”

Edward swallowed thickly, a sensation of unease lodging itself in his gut. He generally avoided thinking or speaking of Clarissa’s baby, a child that had died barely after taking its first breath. It was none of his concern, and it upset Clarissa to speak of it. Still, he knew that she had only been married once, and that was to his father. That meant that her previous child was illegitimate.

He cared nothing for that, of course. Clarissa's business was her own, and it hardly mattered, even if Society felt differently.

"Clarissa, I don't understand."

She continued her pacing, shaking her head. "She married him, of course. I begged her not to, but she wouldn't listen. I warned her. I warned her to stay away. And how was it fair? How was any of it fair? Why did she get to keep her baby, you, when I barely had a chance to hold mine? Not that she would have had much of a life."

Abruptly, she stopped in front of Edward, pressing his face between her hands. He was too surprised to pull away.

"But for the tiniest twist of fate, you would have been my real son," she whispered. "Think of that, Edward. You would have been mine, I would have been the rightful Duchess all along, and none of it would have had to happen."

None of it would have had to happen...

The words went round in round in Edward's head. The feeling of unease had solidified into a real, jarring worry.

"Clarissa," he said carefully, "explain what you mean. I don't understand."

She released his face abruptly and went back to her pacing. There was a manic energy about her now, something strange in her eyes. The taste of the whiskey was sour in Edward's mouth. He could still feel the burn in his throat and wished he hadn't drunk any of it at all. The unease was like an itch in the back of his mind, a warning bell ringing shrilly.

"Clarissa, I must demand an explanation," he heard himself say, his voice shaking

only a little. “You aren’t yourself. What are you talking about? I’ve never heard any of this. I’ve never heard you say that my mother didn’t deserve me, or my father. I thought you two were friends.”

She gave a harsh laugh. “We were friends until she stole your father from me. She said that we could remain friends, that she would help me, that she would find me a suitable match. Well, I didn’t forget. I forget nothing, you see. She stole your father from me, and I stole you from her. And see how well I’ve done! I knew I would be a good mother. Money and titles count for nothing when it comes to raising a child. I raised you well, and I am an even better grandmother. You can ask Alex if you don’t believe me.”

She moved over to the desk, turning her back. The morning light shimmered around her, tracing a glowing outline.

Edward’s heart was pounding faster and faster. He remembered once, as a child, skating on a frozen pond. Halfway across the pond, the ice had begun to crack and shift. Terrified of falling into the frozen water below, he’d skidded across as quickly as he could, flinging himself onto the icy banks in relief. Still, the sensation of shifting ground beneath him, crackling and crunching ominously, had remained with him always.

He felt that now, as if the ground might split open at any moment, depositing him unceremoniously into the icy, deathly, dark water below.

“Clarissa, I don’t understand,” he said, once again. “What are you saying?”

“She never fit in with us,” Clarissa responded. Her back was still turned, her voice small. “I’m sure Daphne is not a bad person, not really. But she never really fit in with us, did she? And I suppose, when you get down to it, you don’t need her. You and Alex only need me. Your mother, and your grandmother. I love you, and you

love me. She only ever got in the way.”

There was a pause between the second to last sentence and the last. This time, Edward didn't risk asking whether Clarissa meant his mother or Daphne.

“Did you have anything to do with Daphne's decision to leave?” Edward asked, his voice shaking. “Clarissa! Look at me.”

He hadn't intended to raise his voice, but even so, it echoed through the quiet study. Clarissa did not turn around. She was staring down at his desk, her head and shoulders bowed.

“I know what I'm doing, Edward,” she answered quietly. “I wish you would trust me more.”

“I would trust you if you would tell me what you mean. What does any of this have to do with me, Daphne, or my mother? I don't understand. You say you know what you're doing, but what are you doing?”

Clarissa turned around slowly, and Edward took an involuntary step back. Her arms hung at her sides, and she clutched the jade-handled letter opener in her right fist. The blade gleamed silver.

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“I did what had to be done, Edward,” she said, her voice soft. “Just like I always do.”

He swallowed thickly, his gaze darting between the blade and his stepmother’s strangely blank, impassive face.

“What have you done?” he whispered. “Clarissa, what have you done?”

CHAPTER 23

Daphne woke up in her childhood bedroom and promptly burst into tears.

And here I was, hoping it was all a dream.

At once, there was a shuffling of fabric in the corner, in what had appeared to be a pile of clothes tossed carelessly on a chair. Emily surfaced from the pile, disheveled and sleepy-eyed.

“You’re awake,” she gasped.

Daphne sat up in bed, wiping her tears on the corner of the quilt. “Emily, have you been here all night?”

Emily smothered a yawn. “Of course. I intended to stay until you’d fallen asleep, remember? But then I think I might have fallen asleep first.”

She disentangled herself from the fabric, revealing that she still wore last night’s gown, crumpled and creased.

Daphne pulled herself up into a sitting position, falling easily into the divot in the mattress worn out by many years of sleeping in the middle of the bed. A few weeks away from home hadn't smoothed out the divot.

Emily settled herself on the edge of the bed, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Mama said I should let you sleep," she said. "She's gone out early to fetch Anna and tell her everything. She's afraid that the Duke of Thornbridge will come storming back and fetch you. You're his wife, so I suppose he could drag you back if he wanted to."

Daphne shook her head. "He won't do that."

"How do you know?"

She hesitated, just for a moment. "I don't know, I just do. He's cold, but not cruel. He'll leave me alone."

Emily eyed her for a long moment. "You say he's cold. What do you mean by that?"

Daphne considered for a while before she answered. Of course, she was not going to tell her sister about the events in the pond, or their wedding night, or any of those times that had left her feeling as though Edward did care.

No, there was more than that. There were a hundred little things he'd said, looks he'd thrown her way, and more that made her believe that perhaps he cared more for her than he claimed.

Or perhaps I was just seeing what I wanted to see.

"He's fair," she said. "He said I could live as a spinster if I wanted to. So, I will."

Emily tilted her head, eyeing her sister thoughtfully. “But you don’t want to live as a spinster.”

Daphne closed her eyes. “No. No, I don’t. But it doesn’t matter what I want, does it? Life doesn’t work out perfectly. It’s not like in the novels, where all the threads are tied together at the end. Besides, Edward is obsessed with that curse nonsense.”

Emily’s eyebrows shot up. “Curse?”

“Yes, you know the story. His mother died giving birth to him, his wife died giving birth to his child. He claims not to believe it wholly, but it’s clear that he does. Part of me wonders whether that’s why he keeps me at arm’s length, but could it not be possible that he simply doesn’t... doesn’t...” Daphne swallowed hard and forced herself to continue. “Doesn’t care about me?”

Emily stared at her, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think that’s possible. I saw him look at you, Daphne. I saw the way he looked at you. I believe he’s fond of you, at the very least.”

Suddenly feeling restless, Daphne threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. Cold air immediately assailed her, cutting through the flimsy material of her nightgown with ease. She strode over to her case, still not unpacked, and began rifling through it, looking for a gown for the day.

“I don’t want fondness,” she answered abruptly, not turning around. “You are fond of me. Mama is fond of me, as is Anna, Beatrice, Theo, and all the rest of them. Plenty of people are fond of me. I wanted more from my husband, Emily.”

There was a small silence.

Daphne pulled out a duckling-yellow gown. It wasn't her favorite color by any stretch of the imagination, but it was easy to put on. She didn't care about what she wore. Why should she?

"You didn't always think that way," Emily said, her voice small. "What changed?"

Daphne straightened up with a sigh. "I don't know. I can't explain it. It just crept up on me. I want him, Emmie. I want a family, a proper life. And his little boy, Alex..." she trailed off, wishing she hadn't brought him up. A lump formed in her throat. "He likes me. I wanted to be a proper mother to him. Instead, I just packed up and ran away when things became difficult. Oh, Emily, do you think I should go back? Do you think I am in love with him? And if I am, what am I to do?"

Emily climbed off the bed and crossed the room to stand beside her sister. "I think that you need time to clear your head," she answered severely. "I think that you don't have to make any decisions just yet."

"I can't seem to think. My head is packed with wool, and I can't think."

"One step at a time," Emily insisted. "Now, I'll help you dress. Once you're dressed and washed, you'll feel better. Then, we'll go down and have breakfast, and once you've eaten, you'll feel even better. And then we'll sit together and talk about things. Then, you can decide. Then, you can think, and no matter what you want to do, Daffie, you know that we're here for you. That we'll support you."

Daphne drew in a deep breath. Misery still hung heavy in her chest, like a weight pulling her down. But Emily was right.

I can't lie in bed all day, feeling sorry for myself.

"Very well," she heard herself say. "We'll do that."

On cue, carriage wheels began to rumble up the drive. Emily crossed to the window and peered out. She winced.

"Uh-oh. Better get started quickly, then. Anna is here."

Edward felt the sting of bile in his throat. The whiskey sloshed in his empty stomach. He swallowed hard, trying to calm himself.

"Clarissa, put down the letter opener. It's sharp. You might cut someone, or yourself."

Clarissa stared at him for a long moment, then down at the letter opener, as if surprised to see it in her hand. She turned the handle over and over in her palm but did not drop the blade. Edward considered briefly whether he should step forward and wrench it from her. He quickly dismissed the idea.

She swallowed thickly, squeezing her eyes shut. "It wasn't meant to happen. It was never meant to happen."

"What wasn't meant to happen? Clarissa, you must tell me. Please tell me," he added, hating the plea in his voice.

The sense of unease had unfolded into fully-fledged dread, hammering at the back of his skull like a headache.

What have you done, Clarissa?

“I’ll tell you,” Clarissa whispered. “It wasn’t supposed to happen. It wasn’t. It was the day you were born. Or the night, rather. There was a terrible storm, the worst we had in years, and your father couldn’t get home in time for the birth.”

Rain hammered against the window, making the glass rattle in its frame. Clarissa suppressed a shiver. The house was so big and drafty, with chilly winds racing across the floors and biting their ankles.

If I were the Duchess, Clarissa thought, with an all-too-familiar flare of bitterness, I’d have done something about how cold this place is.

The rain had flooded the road, and nobody could get to or out of the house. The midwives had arrived, though, sturdier and more determined than the doctor. Clarissa imagined that the Duke of Thornbridge was coming, too, his earlier letters having arrived mud-splattered and damp.

He was too late, though.

On cue, a wail filled the air, coming from a cot placed beside the wide bed. Amongst the disarranged sheets, a shape stirred.

The Duchess of Thornbridge sat up, wincing. “He’s crying, Clarissa. Do you think he’s hungry?”

“Perhaps. I will look at him. Shall I go and fetch the midwives?”

The Duchess shook her head, leaning over to dangle a hand into the crib. “No, let them rest. They’ve worked hard to bring little Edward into the world, and I’m quite all right without them. The birth was awful, but I feel better already. They said I

was built for it, you know.” She paused, chuckling. “Do you think that is a compliment or an insult?”

It was the kind of jokes they used to share when they were younger, pretty creatures coming out for the first time, arm in arm and full of mischief. Before the world got between them.

Or, more accurately, the Duke of Thornbridge.

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Clarissa's father had flown into a rage when he learned that the Duke was marrying her friend.

"You bore his child!" he'd thundered, over and over again. "Does that count for nothing?"

No, Clarissa could have told him. No, it did not.

The Duke was not a romantic man. He had enough money of his own but wanted a wife with good breeding and a title to secure his position in Society. He was attracted to Clarissa, but her grandfather was only a merchant, and Miss Emma Wyndham's grandfather was a baron.

So, Miss Emma became the Duchess of Thornbridge and tried to pretend that the tiny grave dug in the back of Clarissa's rose garden did not belong to a baby at all, let alone her husband's firstborn child.

"Clarissa?"

She glanced up sharply and found Emma looking at her anxiously.

"I was thinking about attending this Season. You should come with me. I'll find you a good husband. The Duke has plenty of decent friends. You can stay with us, and we'll go to parties together. It'll be like old times."

Clarissa forced a smile. "That would be nice."

Emma's face relaxed in relief, and she leaned back against the pillows. The baby was still grouching, his tiny face creased up.

She doesn't deserve him, Clarissa thought, with a flare of rage. She doesn't deserve any of this.

She edged closer to the crib, peering inside. The baby blinked up at her, momentarily distracted. A wave of affection swept over her, just like when she'd held her own baby for those brief moments before her little heart stuttered to a halt.

This should have been mine.

"Would you like some tea?" Clarissa heard herself say before she could stop herself.

Emma smiled at her. "Oh, yes, please. I'm dry as a bone. No wine, I suppose?"

"No, no wine."

Clarissa went over to the table at the back of the room. Various birthing supplies were scattered around—rags, bowls of cooling, bloody water, a pair of sharp scissors, a wooden spoon to bite down on, and more. And a pot of tea, sent up by the midwives only a little while ago.

Clarissa poured a cup, then slid a hand into her apron pocket, her fingers curling around the glass dropper bottle.

She wasn't entirely sure what was in the bottle. When she had given birth, the doctor had called them 'drops'. Morphine, perhaps? It hardly mattered. He'd allowed her a couple of drops in a cup of tea after the birth, to dull the pain and help her sleep. When she had asked for more, he'd refused, telling her that too much of the stuff would stop a person's heart. It had to be administered carefully, he'd scolded her.

And then he'd gone ahead and forgotten to pack up the bottle. Perhaps he was too flustered, having delivered a baby that died so quickly. Perhaps Clarissa's howling grief had unnerved him.

She stared down at the bottle in her palm, the viscous liquid sloshing about inside. She couldn't even say why she'd brought it, except that it might help with the pains of childbirth.

Unscrewing the bottle, Clarissa upended it in one fell swoop. There was barely half a bottle left, and her heart sank.

It wouldn't be enough. She shook the bottle, hoping to squeeze out a few extra drops.

What am I doing? This won't work.

"Is the tea ready, Clarissa?" came Emma's fretful voice from behind. The baby was wailing again, his cries setting Clarissa's teeth on edge. "I'm dry as a bone."

Clarissa clenched her jaw. "Just coming."

Emma's taut face relaxed into a smile as she took the tea. "Oh, thank you. Ah, it's the perfect temperature to drink, too. Why aren't you having any? You must be thirsty."

"There's none left."

"Oh, we should have had a smaller cup each, then. Go and ring the bell, we'll have tea and cake. You deserve it."

"Of course," Clarissa responded woodenly.

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She turned, heading towards the bell pull, but she did not reach out to touch it. Instead, she stared at the velvet rope, her heart thudding. The baby squalled louder.

What am I doing? What am I doing?

She whirled around. “Emma, don’t...”

The words died on her lips.

Emma drained the last drop of the tea with a sigh of satisfaction.

“I’m exhausted,” she yawned, sliding lower against the pillows. “It’s so warm in here. Come sit by me, Clarissa.”

Clarissa moved across the room in a daze and perched on the edge of the bed. She sat there, talking about nothing, until Emma’s eyes fluttered shut and stayed shut. She stayed until Emma’s chest ceased to rise and fall and the color began to drain from her face.

Then, she picked up the cup and slipped it into her pocket, alongside the bottle. Both items would need to be thrown away, destroyed. She considered ringing the bell but then decided against it.

Clarissa got up carefully from the bed, straightening the sheets and tucking them around her dead friend. Then, she picked up Edward carefully, so carefully, and cradled him against her shoulder. Then, she went out to the hallway and began to scream for help.

There was silence at the end of Clarissa's story. Edward's legs were like jelly, threatening to deposit him unceremoniously on the ground.

"You murdered her," he whispered. "You murdered my mother."

Clarissa was weeping, quiet, open-mouthed sobs. Tears ran hotly down her face, dripping unchecked from her chin.

"It wasn't meant to happen that way," she whispered. "Why should she keep her baby and get to be Duchess of Thornbridge, when I had lost everything?"

"It wasn't her you should have resented! It was my father! And... and you married him? After all of this?"

Clarissa shrugged limply. "He never knew. And I suppose he felt some guilt about me and the baby. And Edward, you needed a mother. You needed me."

Edward shook his head violently, backing away. "My... my wife. Jane. You didn't..."

"I did nothing to Jane. She was small and frail, and her health was never good. It was unfortunate. I swear, Edward, I never..."

She reached out to touch him, but he threw himself away, knocking into the table that held the whiskey decanter. It toppled off, almost slowly, and crashed to the floor. A dark stain spread across the carpet, filling the air with the stink of alcohol. Edward gagged.

"How could you?" he gasped. "Your friend. She was your friend!"

"You must forgive me, Edward!" Clarissa begged. "It was for you, all for you!"

He shook his head. "I can never forgive you."

Clarissa flinched back as if he'd struck her. More tears rolled down her cheeks.

"If you won't forgive me," she said numbly, "then I will have lost everything. If I have lost everything, why should I go on living?"

She raised the sharp edge of the letter opener to the side of her neck, where an artery thrummed just under the surface.

Edward leaped forward with a cry. "Clarissa, no! No, you cannot do this to me! Not after everything! You cannot do this to Alex."

Clarissa paused, opening her eyes. The edge of the blade rested against her skin, and a bead of red blood welled up.

"Do you have any idea how my conscience has tortured me?" she whispered. "Do you think I don't know what I have done? I promised her that I would care for you, and I tried to convince myself that she would understand. Most of the time, I can live with it. But sometimes, when I'm alone, it all comes rushing back. The enormity of it. It's too much. I... I can never undo it. I never did another bad thing in my life, you know that, but this... this is too big. I can never atone, can I?"

Edward rubbed a hand over his face.

Murdered. My mother was murdered. By her oldest friend, by the woman who raised me. The woman who was the closest thing to a mother I've ever had.

Then, he looked at Clarissa's wide, pleading eyes, bulging out of a bone-white face. He saw the bead of blood and the way her hand shook around the handle of the knife.

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“You can’t kill yourself, Clarissa,” he heard himself say. “You stole my mother’s life, so you don’t get to decide where your own ends.”

She let out a hoarse laugh. “Well, I daresay it ends at a hangman’s noose.”

He shook his head. “No. I won’t bring more shame on my family, and neither will you.”

She blinked, tears glistening on the tips of her pale eyelashes. “Then what am I to do?”

“For starters,” he responded, holding out his hand, “you can give me that.”

There was a taut moment. For one awful instant, he thought that she was going to cut her throat anyway.

Then, with a ragged sigh, Clarissa moved the blade of the letter opener away from her throat and carefully placed the handle in his upturned palm. There was a smear of blood on the side of her neck, and he tried not to look at it.

“You’ll leave here,” Edward heard himself say, his voice hoarse, “and you’ll never come back. That is how you’ll show me you’re sorry. By staying away from us all, and staying away from the rest of the world.”

“W-Where will I go?”

“I’ll find a convent. And you must promise me to take this to your grave, do you

understand? I... I don't know if I can forgive you. I don't know if my mother would have forgiven you. But if you want to even try to earn my forgiveness, this is what you must do. Don't come to see me. Don't write to me. Don't ever speak Alex's name again. Do you understand?"

"Will... will you tell him?" Clarissa asked listlessly.

Edward crossed the room and tugged on the bell pull.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "One thing is for sure, though. I won't tell him for many, many years."

The door creaked open, and Peter peered in. He did a double-take when he saw Clarissa's state.

"Y-Your Grace?"

"Take my stepmother back to her home," Edward said, his eyes fixed on her. "She's going to pack."

CHAPTER 24

"I can't help but feel," Theodore said slowly, "that you are not telling us everything."

Daphne shot her brother-in-law a baleful glare. "And I can't help but feel, Theo, that you're talking through your hat."

Theodore gave a wry smile. "Was this the sort of witty banter to which you treated your husband, dearie?"

She considered briefly whether she should throw her cup of tea at Theodore's head.

She decided against it. It was, after all, a good cup of tea, and it would be a shame to waste it.

Besides, this isn't really my home anymore. I can't go throwing teacups around willy-nilly.

That thought made her shiver. It wasn't her home, no matter how fervently Emily and her mother told her that it was. Daphne was a married woman, a duchess, and her home should be her husband's home.

Not that my husband wants to share a home with me, of course. Or a bed.

In a jolt, she imagined herself lying back on the edge of Edward's bed, him leaning over her, his head ducked so that the stubble on his cheek grazed her stomach teasingly. She imagined his wry, knowing smile, a kiss pressed to her sensitive skin, making her shiver, his hands skimming down the outside of her thighs. He knew, the wretch. He knew what she wanted, knew that she longed for him to move his lips or his fingers lower, to her core, and to make her feel as though she were flying once again. He knew, and he took his time.

She cleared her throat, doing her best to banish those troublesome thoughts. She was, after all, with her family.

The family was seated in one of the nicest parlors. Anna was pacing up and down by the window, her face a furrow of concentration, and Theodore was lounging across a settle in the corner. As she glanced his way, he propped himself up on one elbow and twisted around to look at his pacing wife.

"Do give over, Anna. You're wearing a path in the carpet," he said, trying to sound jovial.

The tone didn't quite work. Daphne wasn't a fool. She knew that abandoning her husband in that manner, so soon after their marriage, was a bad thing, and Society would have a great deal to say about it.

"I need to walk if I'm to think," Anna responded shortly. "And I need to think. Theo, can you think of any reason why the Duke would be so cold towards Daphne?"

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Theodore paused, thinking. “I could ask Stephen—he has eyes and ears everywhere—but Beatrice is always so strange and oddly protective of her brother-in-law. I think the loss of his wife cut him deep.”

“Do you think he loved her?” Daphne burst out, aware of eyes on her. She had to ask. “He said that it was only a marriage of convenience, as ours was meant to be, but perhaps he’s been in love with her all this time.”

Theodore considered this, then shook his head. “No. They were well-matched enough, but it was fairly common knowledge that they were more like brother and sister than husband and wife. Lots of people do that, you know. They marry a friend because it is comfortable. Love can be a troublesome thing, let me tell you.” He shot Anna a pointed look as he said this, a smile curving his lips.

Anna paused in her pacing and glanced over at him. She stuck out her tongue and continued pacing.

“There’ll be a great deal of talk, and that’s what worries me,” Octavia spoke up. “If we can hide the fact that Daphne left him?”

“Doubtful,” Anna interrupted. “If the coachman who drove her here knows, then the rest of the servants in that household know. From there, it’s only a few steps to the rest of London. This will get out, believe me.”

Daphne shrank back in her seat, listening to them talk over her head.

I’m so inconsiderate. I didn’t even think about my family. I never thought about how

my reputation—and theirs—would suffer. But how could I not have thought about it? Fleeing from my husband's home in the dark, so shortly after marriage. Of course, people will talk.

"I have an idea," Anna said suddenly, cutting through the chatter.

One by one, the others fell silent and glanced up at her. Once she was sure she had their attention, she smiled broadly.

"There's no sense in hiding it," she said. "Everybody will know that Daphne left her husband's house. She's the Duchess of Thornbridge now—everybody is interested in her. They'll want to know why she left. Of course, we don't have the answers to that yet, and that will require some neat conversational side-stepping on our part, to be sure."

"Conversational side... What are you trying to say, Anna?" Octavia demanded.

"I am saying," Anna said, with great patience, "that if she stays holed up here, she will look as guilty as sin. It'll be clear that something is wrong. However, if we all go about our business as usual—and take Daphne with us—people will be confused. We shall be acting as if there is nothing wrong, and they will start thinking that perhaps this is all part of a plan. Perhaps she left her husband's house on good terms. Perhaps he'll be joining her soon. Who knows?"

"I don't much want to make an appearance at the moment," Daphne murmured. "I... I feel rather raw, Anna."

Anna's face softened for a moment. "I know, darling. This is all very upsetting, but now we need to consider damage control. This is serious, Daphne. Already, all eyes are on you after that little stunt you pulled at the wedding. The first one, that is. The one that didn't happen." She cast a quick, apologetic look at Emily, who appeared

unmoved. "All eyes will be onus. I don't expect much, but I think it would do you good to at least show your face in Society. I will bring you along to a party or some event. There's one coming up tomorrow evening, and we will all be there. We will all be there, Daff, and you'll be safe."

Daphne sighed, closing her eyes. "Do I have a choice?"

Anna winced. "I'm afraid not. I was hoping you'd agree with me, and then it wouldn't be too obvious that you didn't have a choice. Still, never mind, eh?"

"In that case, fine. I will come with you."

"Excellent. Daffie, my dear, you shall go to the ball."

Daphne pursed her lips. "Lucky me."

There was a tap on the door. Edward bounced up from behind his desk, his anxiety fizzing. He'd turned away from the window, where he could see servants darting in and out of the dower house in the distance. On his desk, a half-finished letter to the Abbess of St. Agnes' sat, staring accusingly up at him.

It was a fairly well-known place, where women in dire circumstances could find shelter. Women with aggressive, violent husbands who threatened their lives were often sheltered there, as well as beggars, cast-off wives, impoverished spinsters, and so on. Edward would speak to Peter about paying an allowance for Clarissa's upkeep. There was no need for her to suffer. It might be a prison, but he was determined that it would be a comfortable one.

He took a moment to compose himself before opening the door.

Alex stood there, and Mrs. Trench stood behind him. Her face was pale, her hands

folded in front of her.

Alex was glaring at his father.

“Grandmother is packing,” he said, without preamble. “She’s leaving, Papa. Did you send her way?”

Edward glanced up at Mrs. Trench, who spread out her hands helplessly. “He overheard a pair of footmen talking about it. I’m sorry, Your Grace.”

“It can’t be helped,” he said, sighing. “I’ll speak to him alone, Mrs. Trench.”

She nodded, curtsied, and slipped away.

Alex watched her disappear and turned wordlessly back to his father.

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“Come in,” Edward said, gesturing for the little boy to step inside. “I have to talk to you, Alex. It’s a serious matter.”

Alex stepped gingerly into the study, glancing around him. As expected, his eyes fell on the little silver dish perched pointedly on the edge of the desk. He brightened at once.

“Are those marzipans, Papa?”

“Of course. And they’re for you. Come, let’s sit and eat them.”

Edward was secretly pleased with himself for the addition of marzipans. Alex took a couple of sweets and sat in one of the chairs by the fire. He paused, wrinkling his nose.

“It smells of whiskey in here, Papa.”

Edward winced, lowering himself into the opposite chair. “Yes, I spilled some.”

Alex eyed him, his cheek bulging out with a mouthful of marzipan. “Where is Grandmother going?”

“She’s going to stay in a convent.”

“Why?”

Edward drew in a breath. He’d expected this question, of course, but it didn’t make it

any easier to hear it. “Because she isn’t happy here anymore, Alex. Something very bad has been weighing on her for a long time, and she wants to get her peace of mind back.”

Was that too much? Could a child understand such a speech?

Alex eyed him for a long moment. “Is Grandmother angry at me?”

Edward flinched. “At you? No, no, Alex, never.”

“She’s unhappy, though? Can’t we do anything to make her happy again?”

Edward bit his lip, glancing away. “No, Alex, I’m afraid that we can’t. It’s a hard thing to understand, I know, but there it is. You’re old enough and clever enough to know that some things can’t be changed, no matter how much we would like them to be different.”

Alex nodded slowly. “What bad thing did Grandmother do?”

“I... I can’t tell you that.”

A mulish expression settled over Alex’s face. “Why not?”

“Because you’re too young.”

“I’m too young for everything.”

Edward leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “One day, Alex, when you’re much older, I’m going to tell you exactly what happened and what Grandmother did. I can promise you that you’ll understand. You’ll be upset, but you’ll understand why Grandmother had to go. And you’ll be glad that I didn’t tell

you now.”

Alex pursed his lips. “All right. I’ll remember that you said it, though.”

“I should hope so.”

“Can I have another marzipan?”

Edward only hesitated for a moment. “Yes, if you like.”

Alex hopped down from the chair and hurried over to the sweets. He spoke again while his back was turned.

“You don’t always tell me the truth, Papa.”

Denials and excuses swarmed up inside Edward, begging to be said. He pointedly swallowed them down.

“No,” he said, as honestly as he could manage. “No, I haven’t always been honest with you. That was wrong of me. A parent should always be honest with their child. But I promise you now that I’m going to be honest with you about everything. Because, you see, I want you to tell me the truth, so it would be hypocritical for me not to do you the same courtesy.”

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Alex turned around, his mouth full of marzipan, and studied his father for a long moment. At last, he nodded.

Edward had no time to congratulate himself on his excellent parenting. Alex came back to the armchair—it was fairly obvious he had marzipans in his pockets, and Edward had a feeling that if he looked into the bowl, there would be none left—and made himself comfortable.

“Where is Daphne?” he asked.

Edward flinched. He hadn’t been expecting that.

Alex was watching him carefully. Since the boy clearly had a habit of eavesdropping, it was entirely possible that he already knew and was testing him.

Clever boy.

Edward felt a flash of pride.

“Daphne and I had an argument,” he said. “I was unkind to her. She packed her things and went to stay with her mother for a while.”

Alex swallowed his mouthful of sweets. Sadness swept across his young face, and Edward felt like the worst father in the world.

“Oh,” he said quietly. “Will she be coming back?”

“I don’t know,” Edward answered honestly. “I hope so, but I can’t promise anything.”

Alex nodded slowly. “Is... is it my fault? Is she upset with me?”

Edward reached out and took Alex’s small hand in his own. “No, Alex, she is not. I can tell you that Daphne cares about you very much.”

“She didn’t say goodbye.”

There was a little catch in Alex’s voice, and an answering crack opened up in Edward’s heart.

I’m sorry, little man. This is all my fault.

“I know how much you like Daphne,” he said a little hesitantly. “But we?—”

“You don’t know how much I like her,” Alex huffed, shaking his head. “How could you? You never talk to me about anything. You only did things with me because Daphne told you to.”

Edward missed a beat, gathering his thoughts. He had tried to plan out how the conversation would go in his head, but he might have known that was pointless. One couldn’t plan out anything, not with a child thrown into the mix.

“You’re right,” he relented. “I spent time with you because Daphne told me to, or Mrs. Trench hinted that I should, or Peter reminded me. And that was very, very wrong of me. I am your father. I shouldn’t have had to be reminded or instructed to spend time with you. I’m sorry, and from now on, I shall do better.”

Alex blinked at him, all big, mournful eyes. “It’s all right, Papa. I know why you act

strangely around me. It's because Mama died because of me, isn't it?"

Time seemed to slow down. Edward's chest constricted, seeming to press all of the air out of his lungs. Before he even knew what he was doing, he was out of his chair, on his knees in front of Alex. He caught the boy's sticky hands in his own and held them tight.

"It was not your fault, Alex," he said, his voice shaking. "Not one bit. When I was your age, my father used to tell me that it was my fault that my mother died. At the time, I believed him. I believed it for a long time."

"But... you don't believe it anymore?" Alex hazarded.

A lump had formed in Edward's throat, and no amount of swallowing could make it go down.

I think I believed it right up to this moment.

Now, looking at his son's wide, pleading eyes, his trembling lower lip, and the pain on his face, Edward could feel nothing but rage. Rage at his father.

I was as small and as frightened as Alex once. How dare he? How dare he put the burden of that tragedy on my shoulders? He looked me in the eye and told me that I was a little monster, a murderer, responsible for my mother's death. How could he?

He reached up, touching Alex's cheek.

"It was very sad, what happened to your mother," he heard himself say. "To Jane. Frankly, Alex, I blamed myself for it all, but the fact is that it was a tragedy. Do you know the last thing she said to me? It was about you, Alex. She said you were the most beautiful baby in the world. She'd held you, even as she was dying, and she

loved you so much that she couldn't even find the words. She made me promise to love you and take care of you, and I'm not sure I've been fulfilling my end of the bargain. But your mother loved you, Alex. She loved you so much. She never blamed you for what happened, not for an instant. And neither do I."

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Alex sniffled, a fat tear rolling down his cheek. Edward carefully wiped it away with the pad of his thumb.

“I wish I could have known Mama,” Alex whispered. “She sounds nice.”

“She was nice. One day, and one day soon, you’ll go and stay with Aunt Beatrice, who loved your Mama so much. She’ll tell you all about her, which I should have done years ago. In the meantime, Alex, we’ll be a family. You and I. I love you, Alex. I don’t believe I’ve ever told you that, and that is my fault. But you mean the world to me. You mean the absolute world.”

Alex gave a watery smile. “So... if I told you something bad, right now, you wouldn’t be angry with me?”

Edward bit back a grimace. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“All right. Well, I was the one who wrote to the scandal sheet, telling them that Daphne was here.”

Well, Edward had not been expecting that. He schooled his expression, however, and pushed through his horror.

“I see. Well, I’m sure you know that was very wrong of you and could have gone very badly.”

Alex nodded eagerly. “Yes, but I wanted Daphne to stay a little longer. And I thought she would make a good mother. So, I wrote the letter myself, and had Pet—that is,

someone in the house deliver it. Besides, I could tell that you liked her.”

Edward squinted at his son. “And how could you tell that?”

Alex shrugged. “I just could.”

“Hm. Well, as I said, I’m not angry with you, but you must promise not to do anything like that again.”

Alex nodded solemnly. “I won’t, I promise. I only had to do it once.”

“Well, I can only have one wife at a time.”

“And right now,” Alex pointed out helpfully, “your wife is Daphne. I wish she would come back. It felt like a family when she was here.”

Edward bit the inside of his cheek, biting down hard to give himself something to focus on. “Yes,” he admitted, “it did feel like family, didn’t it?”

“I wish she’d come back. Can’t you write and tell her? I can write and tell her, and say?—”

“I think you’ve written quite enough letters already,” Edward said hastily. “No, I’ll go and fetch her myself.”

Alex nodded, seeming temporarily soothed. “And what if she doesn’t want to come back?”

“Well, then I’ll...” Edward hesitated.

What? What will I do? Drag her back by her hair? The law might allow a man to

compel his wife to come and live with him, but I'm not that sort of man. And she is certainly not that sort of woman. Besides, I don't think I want to bring the ire of her family down on my head. Lady St. Maur might tear my throat out with her teeth.

His thoughts were interrupted by Alex launching himself forward and wrapping his arms around his father's shoulders. He rested one sticky cheek against Edward's neck.

"I love you, Papa," Alex mumbled.

The lump was back in Edward's throat, threatening to choke him. Slowly, tentatively, as if he wasn't sure what he was doing, he wrapped his arms around his son, holding him close.

"I love you too, Alex," he answered.

The words felt strange and heavy in his mouth, but he was sure that if he said them enough, they would start to feel a little more normal.

My son.He bit back a smile.My son loves me.

"Please try and get Daphne back. If you can."

He clenched his jaw. "I promise you, Alex, I'll do everything I can to bring her back. I swear it."

CHAPTER 25

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“This is ridiculous,” Daphne huffed. “I don’t want to do this. Can’t we go home?”

The carriage was a little too full. The family had decided to go together, which meant that there was Daphne, Emily, and Octavia on one bench, and Anna, Theodore, and Beatrice on the other.

The carriage was not really designed for six people. Every time Daphne breathed, an elbow stabbed her in the ribs.

A sense of unease had been building up in the pit of her stomach over the afternoon. She’d felt it as they all sat together over a late luncheon, everybody talking except her. She’d felt it as she stood in front of the mirror and watched herself getting dressed, her movements mechanical like a puppet’s.

Why did it feel so strange, being without Edward? It wasn’t as if they’d been joined at the hip. And really, what had happened between them? A few moments of intimacy, a few arguments, a few pleasant moments. Why should she feel bereaved without him?

It’s nonsense. You are nonsensical.

Anna sighed, finally glancing at Daphne. “We’ve talked about this, Daff. You have to show your face. You can’t just hide in the house. This won’t blow over, you know.”

“It will blow over,” Theodore remarked, his gaze fixed out of the window. “Society will move on. But it will move on without you, Daphne. Be under no illusions. No matter the circumstances under which a woman runs from her husband, Society will

always side with him.”

A lump formed in Daphne’s throat. She leaned back in her seat as best as she could and closed her eyes.

“Was he cruel to you, Daphne?” Beatrice asked, speaking for the first time in a while.

“Cruel? No, he was just... cold. Sometimes, at least,” Daphne added, with a twinge of guilt.

It was dark in the carriage, the only light coming from the bouncing lantern hanging outside the window. The night was a cloudy one, with no moon or stars to be seen. It was cold, too, and Daphne found herself wishing with all her heart that she could be back at home, wrapped up and snug before a roaring fire.

Not just any home, she realized with a flare of misery. Thornbridge.

Beatrice nodded, as if learning something she already knew.

“I don’t know much about Edward,” she said. “He and Jane weren’t married long enough for him to properly feel like one of the family.”

Beatrice had not spoken much about her former brother-in-law, despite Anna pressing her. So, when she began to speak now, everybody leaned forward, paying attention. She looked at nobody in particular, her gaze fixed on her hands in her lap.

“I asked Jane once, shortly before she married him, whether she loved him,” Beatrice continued, a furrow appearing between her eyebrows. “She said no. At least, she said, ‘Not like a wife loves a husband.’ They were always friends, and she thought they’d be a good match. Jane always said that she was not made to fall in love, and didn’t particularly want to. Sometimes, I think she would have liked to be in love, to feel

what came so easily to others. Even so, they were happy. She was excited about her baby. And Edward was kind to her. She said that he was a good man.”

Beatrice paused, gathering her thoughts, and gave a little nod, as if confirming something she was going over in her head.

“Yes,” she murmured, half to herself. “A good man, that’s what Jane said. A very good man.”

There was a short silence after this.

Daphne shifted, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

What should I say next? Should I say anything?

Should I not have left him?

As Daphne was deliberating, Octavia leaned forward, clearing her throat.

“That’s enough of that subject,” she said severely. “We are here to support Daphne tonight. She’ll show her face, perhaps dance a few sets, eat something, drink something, and then leave. We’ll all leave together, and then Society will see that she isn’t hiding her presence in town. They’ll see that we have nothing at all to hide.”

“There’ll be gossip,” Emily pointed out, matter-of-factly. “Probably to her face. To our faces, in fact. Everybody is going to have something to say.”

The dread in Daphne’s stomach intensified. She shifted, trying to swallow down her fear.

It’s a party. It’s just a party. How many parties have I been to?

This one, she suspected, was going to be different.

“My friend is the host,” Anna said, changing the subject. “Mrs. Whitmore. She’s a pleasant woman, very kind and understanding. When I asked for an invitation to be extended to Daphne, she agreed at once. She’ll help keep an eye on things. But, Daphne, you must keep a low profile. Don’t be too loud, or shocking, or talkative. Simply glide around like the Duchess you are, and act as though you’re too haughty to talk to anyone.”

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Daphne grimaced. “I’m not good at being haughty.”

Anna chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’ll teach you. Stick with us, and all will be well.”

I wish I could believe that.

The carriage slowed and turned, beginning to rattle its way up a steep, wide driveway, well-graveled and raked, joining a line of other glowing carriages. At the top of the driveway was a large house, windows all lit up. Even from the bottom of the path, Daphne could hear chatter, laughter, and music drifting out of the wide-open front doors.

“Mrs. Whitmore’s ballroom is the largest in London,” Anna explained. “We’ll walk down a marble hallway once we greet her at the door, and then down a flight of stairs into the ballroom. Just so you know where you’ll be going, Daff.”

“Everything will be fine,” Emily said, smiling mechanically.

Daphne still did not believe them.

It seemed to take an age before their carriage rolled to a halt altogether before the wide front steps. Squeezing out of the cramped interior took a few moments, and the cold hit Daphne’s exposed skin almost immediately when she stepped outside. She pulled at her neckline self-consciously.

It wasn’t a very shocking dress, although the neckline scooped down and around her collarbones, skimming the tips of her shoulders. It was a pastel-mint color, an unusual

shade and very becoming, but otherwise cut simply and demurely. She didn't glitter with diamonds the way Anna and Theodore did, nor was she studded with emeralds like Beatrice. Even so, Daphne felt as though all eyes were on her.

I want to go home.

She did not fling herself back into the carriage, which felt like a success. She followed the others up the steps, to where Mrs. Whitmore waited.

She was a tall, handsome woman, widowed as everyone knew, and probably the richest woman in London. Her red hair glinted in the candlelight, and her shrewd grey eyes swept over the group. She greeted everyone with the greatest courtesy, one by one, and only hesitated for a tenth of a second when she saw Daphne.

"Your Grace," she said, smiling faintly. "It is a great honor to have the Duchess of Thornbridge here. I am a great friend of your sister's, and I hope that you and I will become friends, too."

Daphne managed a smile and a curtsy. "I hope so, too."

"I hope you enjoy yourself, Your Grace," Mrs. Whitmore said, her sparkling eyes still watching Daphne with intrigue. "Do feel free to come and speak to me if anything is amiss, or if you require anything. Anything at all."

A faint pressure on Daphne's hand, and then Mrs. Whitmore turned to greet her next guests.

Emily's hand snaked into Daphne's. "Nobody will even notice us come in," she whispered. "I'll find us some seats and some refreshments, and we can just sit down and make fun of what everybody else is wearing."

Daphne smiled wanly. “Thank you, Emmie. I’d like that.”

As Anna had warned, the hallway led to a wide landing, with gleaming steps leading down into a veritable sea of people. Waves of heat rushed up to meet them, as well as a cacophony of laughter and chatter, swirled by the constant shuffle of slippers on stone and the swishing of skirts. Music curled around the noise, drifting up to hang around the chandelier.

A footman by the door looked them over briefly, cleared his throat, and bellowed out their names to the crowd.

“The Duke and Duchess of Langdon! The Duchess of Blackwood! Lady St. Maur and her daughter, Miss Belmont! The Duchess of Thornbridge!”

Daphne knew at once that the herald had made a mistake. She ought to have been announced earlier, along with Anna, Theodore, and Beatrice.

It hardly mattered, though, because as the sound of her title died down, a hush fell over the ballroom.

Well, not over the entire ballroom. The room was huge, the music was still playing, and most of the guests would not have heard the herald yell out the titles.

Enough did, however. It seemed like hundreds of people, all clustered near the doorway, turned and stared up at Daphne, their eyes goggling.

They know. They know about it all. About my failed wedding ceremony, about my scandal, the rushed wedding to Edward. And now they know that I’ve left him. Not a single secret of mine is kept hidden.

Emily’s hand, still laced with hers, tightened.

“You aren’t alone, Daff,” she whispered. “Come on, let’s get it over with.”

As a group, they descended the stairs. Whispers rose in a susurrus. Daphne kept her head high and tried not to notice.

To start with, the crowd parted to let them pass by, like a Red Sea of gossip. But the people closed in behind them, and gradually the noise started up again. People began to jostle Daphne and the others.

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They barely made it a quarter of the way across the ballroom—there were chairs set out for matrons at the opposite end of the room, by the refreshments table—when Beatrice hissed, stumbling. Her hand flew to her rounded belly.

Anna noticed at once, frowning. “Beatrice? Are you well?”

“It’s too hot,” Beatrice murmured, “and crowded. I am sorry, but I must go back. I’ll find a quiet room to sit in until things quieten down.”

Anna bit her lip, glancing between her friend and her sister.

“Go with Beatrice, Anna,” Daphne said. “I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll go with her,” Theodore said firmly. “Stay with your sister, Anna.”

He offered Beatrice his arm, and she took it gratefully.

The four of them moved off, trying desperately to stick together in the jostle of the crowds. The heat was intense, and Daphne felt sweat bead on her neck and trickle down her back.

There were plenty of stares thrown her way. Long, calculating looks from disapproving faces. The noise of chatter pervaded the whole room, of course, but somehow the sibilant whispers still made their way to Daphne’s ears.

“What isshedoing here?”

“I wouldn’t show my face in Society ever again if I were her.”

“Hear, hear. Modern women have no shame.”

“That husband of hers will come and drag her home by her ear soon, I wager. She’ll learn the way of things.”

Daphne clenched her jaw and concentrated on not responding.

They were getting to the middle of the ballroom when a cluster of people descended upon Anna and Octavia. Daphne faintly recognized them as family friends, although she did not miss the quick, disapproving looks thrown at her.

In a trice, the crowd had separated their group in two. Octavia and Anna were left to talk to the family friends, civility keeping them prisoner, while Daphne and Emily were rapidly pushed away by the crush.

Emily, faintly panicked, stood up on her slippered tiptoes, trying in vain to look over the heads of the crowd.

“Mama? Anna!” she called, waving her arm. “We’ll meet you by the refreshments table!”

“Did they hear us?” Daphne asked.

Emily shrugged. “No way of telling. We’ll never get back to them now. Heavens, this is such a crush. I hate parties.”

Hand in hand—Daphne was now terrified that her sister would be torn away from her, too—they pushed onwards through the crowd.

If we can get to some seats, all will be well. We'll drink some champagne, and things will start to feel better. I'll dance just once, with Theo, as Anna told me to, and then we can leave. And then my first appearance in Society after my wedding will be over, and that will be that. I'll be safe. It'll be over.

She swallowed hard, tightening her grip on Emily's hand, and tried to repeat to herself over and over that all would be well.

And then the Misses Jenkins stepped in their way.

There were three Jenkins girls, all very pretty, all resembling each other enough to almost be considered triplets. This was their first Season, and the girls remained unmarried. It was generally thought that their faces were not pretty enough and their fortunes were not large enough to make up for their needling personalities.

Daphne had never personally disliked the Jenkins girls, and she privately thought that they were simply doing what they could to marry well and find their places in an ever-shifting world, as well as getting out from under their overbearing parents' thumbs. They were referred to as Miss Jenkins, Miss Minerva, and Miss Clementine.

"How lovely to see you in Society again, Daphne," Miss Jenkins fluted. It was lucky that she was the eldest and could be referred to as simply Miss Jenkins, as Daphne happened to know that her first name was Ermingarde, and Miss Jenkins thoroughly hated it. "Although, I suppose it's Your Grace, now."

Daphne smiled tentatively. "It is, but I hate the title. You can still call me Daphne. We are the same age, after all."

Miss Minerva and Miss Clementine exchanged meaningful glances, but they let their older sister do the talking.

Miss Jenkins pursed her lips. “I should congratulate you on your good fortune. Not every woman has the luck to marry a duke. I, for one, would settle for a plain, old lord.”

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“I’d settle for aSir,” Miss Clementine chimed in and was promptly elbowed in the side by her sister.

Daphne swallowed. “Well, once I’m settled, I’ll throw a proper ball, and you ladies can come along. I’ll invite as many eligible bachelors as I can, and you can see who you can meet.”

Miss Jenkins paused, whatever snide comment she was planning to make quickly forgotten. “Really? You’d do that for us?”

Daphne shrugged. “We women must marry, I suppose. You and I were friends, once, weren’t we?”

Miss Jenkins bit her lip and glanced away, twisting around to look at her sisters as if for support.

“We were friends, once,” she murmured. “But that was a long time ago. It hardly matters, though. Why don’t you come sit with us?”

“We’re expecting to be joined by my mother and sister,” Emily spoke up. “We shan’t stay long. We’ll find seats somewhere and sit quietly until it’s time to leave.”

Miss Jenkins continued to chew on her lip. “Very well.”

Daphne hid a smile. In her experience, the best way to dodge forthcoming nastiness from another person was to be kind to them. It worked almost every time.

“We should go,” she said, with just the right note of apology.

They stepped past the Jenkins girls and were ready to disappear into the crowd again when Miss Clementine spoke up.

“I’m glad you left him, Daphne! It was nothing more than he deserved.”

Daphne stopped dead, a cold feeling spreading through her.

Emily shot her an anxious look and tugged on her hand in vain. “Come on, Daff, we’re nearly there.”

Daphne pulled her hand free of her sister’s and turned back to face the Jenkins girls. “What do you mean?” she heard herself ask, her voice strained.

Miss Clementine looked a little nervous, and her sister elbowed her in the side, hard. They both looked at Miss Jenkins to respond.

She sighed, shaking her head. “Come, Daphne, don’t be coy. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I don’t understand what you are trying to say,” Daphne responded hotly. “Tell me, what do you mean? As far as I know, you three haven’t even met my husband, and you certainly don’t know him well enough to decide what he deserves or not.”

Miss Jenkins eyed her contemptuously. “Oh, Daphne, you still are a little fool, aren’t you? They called him the Cursed Duke, you know.”

“Cursed? Oh, we believe in curses now, do we?”

Miss Jenkins rolled her eyes. “No. But in my experience, folks generally bring their own luck upon themselves.”

Daphne's fingers clenched into fists. "Do explain."

Miss Minerva stepped forward, tugging on her sister's sleeve. "Let's go, Ermie," she whispered. "She's half-mad, look at her."

Miss Jenkins yanked her arm away, taking a step towards Daphne. "If you must know," she said smoothly, "and I cannot believe that you do not know, the Duke of Thornbridge is rather famously low on luck. His mother died, his wife died, and his second wife has just abandoned him. And, if my sources are correct—which they are—his stepmother is leaving him, too. It's plain as day that the man is cursed one way or the other."

Daphne gave a sharp bark of laughter. "Well, I can tell you that is not true. Lady Clarissa would never abandon him, and you may tell that to your sources."

She knew that her voice was pitching higher and higher, but she simply did not care.

Emily tugged at her sleeve, whispering urgently, "Daphne, stop it! People are looking. Let's go, shall we? Leave Miss Jenkins alone."

Daphne shook off her sister's arm and took a step closer, pointing a finger to Miss Jenkins' face. "You listen to me, you wet rag of a woman. My husband is not cursed. I can assure you that he is not cursed. You, however, might well end up cursed. How would you like that? I'll curse you myself!"

There was a brief silence, which Daphne assumed was due to her raised voice.

A fraction of a second too late, she realized that all had gone quiet around her because the Jenkins girls were staring over her head at someone behind her.

“Why, thank you, wife,” came a low, deep voice. “You make an excellent duchess, I must say.”

CHAPTER 26

Daphne spun around, staring up at him as though he had suddenly grown too heads.

Edward, whose heart had pounded hard enough to make him sick most of the way here, allowed himself a small, neat smile.

She can never accuse me of not being surprising enough, then.

He had wondered on and off whether Daphne might have told her family the whole story, but judging by the glare Emily Belmont directed at him, he guessed that she had. The Other Daphne, as he'd called her in his head, was staring at him as if she wanted to tear his head off. He gave her a polite smile, which was not returned.

The three unfamiliar women were also gawking at him. The oldest and tallest one closed her jaw with a snap.

“Well,” she said. “What a surprise to see you here, Your Grace.”

He raised an eyebrow. “My wife is here. Why would I not be here, too?”

This was an excellent point, and the woman glanced uncertainly to her sisters for support. The women mumbled something, turned around unceremoniously, and scuttled off into the crowd.

“I hope they weren’t friends of yours,” Edward remarked, turning back to Daphne. “I think I might have scared them off. But then they thought I was cursed and that you were going to curse them, so perhaps they were glad to have an excuse to leave.”

He thought that was rather funny, but Daphne did not laugh. She stared up at him, a furrow between her eyebrows.

She’s so beautiful.

Her gown fit her perfectly, skimming tantalizingly over her shoulders. The white column of her neck was craned so she could look at him, her hair falling in ringlets down her nape. He suddenly found himself choked with desire, longing to lean forward and kiss her, touch that smooth white skin and wrap a ringlet around his fingertip.

Somebody jostled him from behind, and the dizzy longing evaporated as quickly as it had come. People were looking at him. He could feel their stares boring into his shoulders, curious and disapproving. People loved drama, after all.

Gossip about the disgraced Duchess of Thornbridge and her cursed husband arriving without warning must have already shot across the ballroom. It would be discussed thoroughly tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. Perhaps even several weeks from now, barring anything more interesting happening. The scandal sheets would mention it, and that would only serve to keep the scandal alive.

He found that he didn’t care. Not one bit. Why should he? What did it matter what any of them thought? All that mattered was Daphne.

She was still staring up at him incredulously. Her sister stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her, her arms folded and her face set in a scowl.

“I wonder how you dare,” Emily burst out. She took a step forward, wagging her finger in his face. “How could you treat my sister this way? And then to turn up here, scandalizing everybody—I know for a fact you weren’t invited!—and act as if nothing is wrong! I might not believe in curses, but I think you deserve a healthy dollop of bad luck! In fact...”

Edward blinked down at the tiny fury. She was forced to stand on her tiptoes, and even still she was about a foot shorter than him. It was strange that Daphne, while being the same height as her twin sister, seemed so much taller.

Emily finished her lecture with a nod, pushing her spectacles further up on her nose. “And what do you have to say to that, Sir?”

Edward cleared his throat. “Well, I... I’m sorry.”

Emily blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

He held out his arms to the sides. “I’m sorry. I acted badly, and with great coldness. I had reasons for my actions, but reasons can be little more than excuses. The plain fact is that I did not expect Daphne to leave me. I suspect I’ve been living with my head buried in the sand, like an ostrich, and my wife’s departure was the sharp jolt I needed.”

Emily seemed a little surprised by this. She glanced at her sister, who had remained silent throughout this entire conversation.

Daphne gave a faint shrug. “What do you want, Edward?” she asked.

She sounded resigned and tired, and a flash of guilt lanced through his chest.

“I want to talk,” he answered. “Will you dance with me?”

She nibbled on her lower lip, eyeing him. “No,” she said. “I might dance with somebody else, though.”

He snorted. “I won’t allow it.”

“Oh, no?”

“No, I won’t. I don’t much like other men touching what is mine.”

Daphne narrowed her eyes at him. “Yours?” she said, at the same moment that Emily muttered, “Oh, good heavens.”

Edward lifted his hands in surrender. “Please, Daphne. I want to talk to you.”

She sighed. “Very well. But not on the dance floor. We’re attracting enough stares as it is. Come, let’s talk somewhere private. There are a few little reading rooms off the ballroom. We can go there.”

“Daff...” Emily trailed off as she caught her sister’s eye. She heaved a sigh. “Whatever you like, Daffie. I’ll go and find Mama and Anna, and let them know what’s happening.”

A look passed between the two women—a quick, sisterly glance that Edward could not interpret.

Emily reached out, laying a hand on her sister’s shoulder. Then, she was off, weaving nimbly through the crowd, and Edward and Daphne were left alone.

Well, as alone as one could be when crammed into a ballroom, with hundreds of people hemming one in.

“Follow me,” Daphne said, not meeting his eyes. “It’s this way.”

The little reading rooms were an unusual addition to a ballroom. Anna had told Daphne that Mrs. Whitmore headed several literature clubs, and refreshments would be had in the ballroom and reading done in the little alcoves. Ladies only, of course. She was probably breaking some rule, leading Edward into the alcove.

A curtain separated the alcove from the rest of the ballroom. A candelabra lit up the small space, casting flickering shadows over the walls and ceiling. There was a small, square window in the back of the room, closed with a heavy velvet curtain, but doubtless looking over the garden. A single seat was placed by the curtain, and a low settee was set against the wall before a round table, on which the candelabra sat.

There were, of course, bookshelves lining the walls. At another time, Daphne would have liked to inspect the spines, taking out a few interesting-looking books, but she found that she could concentrate on nothing but Edward.

A jolt of relief and desire had flashed through her in the instant she first heard his amused, deep voice. The intensity of her feelings had terrified her. And then she'd turned, and there he was, staring down at her with a hungry look in his eyes. In response to that look, she had felt, and could still feel, the answering pull of desire in the pit of her stomach.

To distract herself, she folded her hands in front of her waist and did her best to meet his eyes coolly and calmly.

"So, then, Edward, what do you want? Or perhaps we should start with how you knew I was here."

He shrugged. "I knew you'd gone to your mother's. I went there first, only to find that you were not at home. A little digging revealed that Mrs. Whitmore was hosting a ball. Well, anyone who is anyone attends her parties, and I happen to know that your sister attends her book clubs. It was a short leap to guess that you would be here."

She stared at him. “For a man who shuns Society, you know a good deal about it.”

He grinned sheepishly. “A great deal of Society requires only common sense and a little rational thought. Perhaps I shouldn’t have surprised you here, but I... I wanted to see you, Daphne. I wanted to see you so badly that I could not wait.”

She wanted to beam with delight, to throw her arms around his broad shoulders and kiss his cheek. She did not do that, however.

He doesn’t love you. He cares only for his reputation and wants you to come home so that he doesn’t feel guilty. Remember how cold he was.

“If you’re here to convince me to come back,” she said aloud, “you’re wasting your time.”

His face fell. “You won’t come? You must know that I won’t compel you, Daphne.”

“No, I know you would never force me to do anything. But no, I mean quite the opposite. I will have to come back, I suppose. I shall live as a spinster, and you will live as a bachelor. But fear not, I won’t bother you. Alex deserves better. I... I blamed myself for his accident, but I know it was not my fault. Not truly. I’ll come home, so you have wasted your trip here. You can go back to pretending that you do not care for me. Although, of course, it’s not a pretense, is it?”

He closed his eyes momentarily. Was that pain Daphne saw flashing across his face? No, surely not. A man like Edward did not feel pain.

“You mistake me, Daphne,” he murmured. “I did come to convince you to come home, it’s true. But I also came to tell you the truth.”

“The truth? What horrifying secrets are you here to tell me?”

He held out his hands to either side. “Nothing I myself knew, up until yesterday.”

She paused, frowning. There was a strange, haunted look in his eyes, and a sense of unease flitted through her again.

“Edward? What are you talking about?”

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Edward turned away from her, pacing the short length of the room as if to compose himself.

“You might have heard that my stepmother has left my grounds and my home.”

Daphne staggered backward. “I did hear it, but I didn’t... I didn’t give credence to such silly whispers. I assumed it was nonsense.”

“I’m glad I stopped believing in the curse,” he said, with a snort. “Otherwise, this would have terrified me. No, Clarissa left this morning. She has gone to a convent.”

Daphne suddenly found herself off-balance and dizzy, and she sat down in the single chair with a thump.

“Aconvent?” she echoed disbelievingly. “Why? Oh, Edward, did you send her away?”

“Yes, I did, but when you hear why, you’ll agree with me. I swear it.”

She eyed him narrowly. “Are you sure? Tell me what you mean.”

He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again, glancing nervously towards the closed curtain that separated them from the rest of the ballroom.

“I don’t wish to discuss it here,” he murmured. “It’s... sensitive. It shocked me, and I know it will shock you. I will tell you everything, but only once we can talk in absolute private. This information must never, ever see the light of day. Again, you’ll

understand why when you hear the story.”

“Edward, you’re scaring me,” Daphne said, with a nervous laugh. “Has there been a murder?”

He said nothing, and Daphne had to turn away from the look in his eyes.

“I see,” she whispered. “You know, you don’t have to explain all of it to me, not if you don’t want to. Your business is your own, and I don’t want to pry.”

He bit his lip. “I know, but I want to. I want to tell you the truth, Daphne. You deserve to know the whole story. I’ve kept enough back from you to last a lifetime, to be frank.”

She got up, somewhat shakily, and paced over to the bookshelves. The titles blurred in the flickering candlelight.

“And... and Alex?” she heard herself say. “What about him?”

“He will miss his grandmother,” Edward admitted. “And he misses you, too. Here, I have this for you.”

He withdrew a little square of paper, carefully but imperfectly folded, and sealed with a blob of red wax. Daphne’s name was written on the front in a looping, childish hand.

“It’s from Alex, of course,” Edward added unnecessarily. “It’s all his work. Except for the seal, which I helped him with. I didn’t want him playing with hot wax on his own.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “I missed him, you know. He’s such a sweet boy.”

At this point, Edward was standing by the curtained doorway, and Daphne by the window, with the whole room between them. He took a hesitant step forward, and Daphne mirrored him before she knew what she was doing.

“And me?” Edward whispered. “Did you miss me?”

She closed her eyes. “Don’t do this to me, Edward. I... I love too easily, I think. If I fall in love, then it hurts, and I cannot get out again. You blow hot and cold, and I simply can’t manage it. I don’t blame you—I believe it is who you are. You are yourself, and I am me, and perhaps it is best if we go our separate ways.”

When she risked opening her eyes again, Edward was staring at her, the hunger back in his eyes. She felt the reciprocal shiver through her whole body and resisted the urge to race towards him.

“I don’t want to be that way, though,” he said, his voice shaking in a way she’d never heard before. “I married Jane because it was easy and comfortable. I knew she’d never love me properly, since it was not her way. For me, that meant that I did not have to worry about loving her, about losing my heart. You saw how I distanced myself from Alex because I was afraid. I was a fool, Daphne. I have spoken to Alex and apologized for being a poor father. I told him I loved him, Daphne. I don’t believe I’ve ever said that to another living soul. My father certainly never said it to me.”

Daphne swallowed hard, absorbing his words.

Holding his gaze, she tilted up her chin. “I’m proud of you. Alex deserves a father, and you deserve to understand that the way you were treated was wrong—terribly wrong. I believe you do understand it now.”

He took a tentative step forward. Once again, Daphne mirrored him.

“And you, Daphne,” he said, his voice a low rumble in his chest. “I blew hot and cold, as you said. The truth was, I always intended to be cold, but when you are around, I cannot control myself...I have never encountered such feelings before.”

She swallowed thickly. Her mouth was dry. Another step. “Explain.”

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“I’m familiar with the feeling of desire, of course,” he began, chuckling wryly. “And you are a beautiful woman. But there’s more. I want to spend more time with you, Daphne. I want to talk to you, listen to you, and hear your opinion on things. I care about what you think, it seems.”

“What a shocking turn of events,” she remarked acidly. “How unfortunate for you.”

He chuckled again. “It is unfortunate because you, my dear, have a great many opinions, and I find that I want to hear all of them.”

“Oh dear. Perhaps you are cursed.”

He laughed aloud at that.

The gap between them was almost closed. A prickling sensation ran over Daphne’s skin, making her shiver. Desire throbbed in her stomach, pulsing lower and lower.

At last, Edward lifted his hand, tentatively at first, and then with greater confidence when she did not pull away. His fingertips ghosted over the side of her neck, across her shoulders, and then down to trace the edge of her neckline. Her heart pounded so hard that she was sure he could hear it.

“I want you, Daphne,” he whispered. “Properly. Not snatched moments and losses of control here and there. I want us to be properly married. I want Alex to look upon you as a mother. I want... well, I suppose what I am trying to say is that I wish to renegotiate our agreement.”

Her breath hitched in her throat. “Well. I... I would be amenable to that. But, Edward, you cannot push me away again. I don’t expect you to change the habits of a lifetime in an instant, but you must try, please.”

“If only you will give me another chance, I will try to do whatever you require,” Edward whispered, and the next thing she knew, he was kissing her.

His arm wound around her waist, pressing her against him. His lips were dry and smooth. He tasted of salt and whiskey, and she felt the edge of his teeth slide against her lower lip. Heat flared in her gut, pulsing between her legs. She gripped his shoulders as if to steady herself, sliding a hand to cup the back of his neck.

His free hand slid up her ribcage, his fingers teasing the underside of her breast, and Daphne broke away to gasp aloud, desire making her shudder.

“Daphne, I...” Edward whispered against her throat.

And then the curtain flew back.

They leaped apart as if a pot of boiling water had been thrown their way. A faintly scandalized pair of young dandies were standing there, staring at them, with books tucked under their arms.

“Oh,” one of the dandies managed. “I... We... didn’t know the room was occupied.”

Daphne knew she must have looked flushed and disheveled. She tossed back her head, hoping she wasn’t too red in the face.

“It’s quite all right,” she said coolly. “We are just leaving.”

The dandies exchanged nervous glances.

Daphne strode past them, and Edward followed after her, shooting the dandies contemptuous glances. The poor gentlemen skittered away as he passed.

“So, that is what these rooms are used for,” one of them whispered to the other.

Daphne tried not to hear it.

“You brought your carriage, I assume,” she whispered, pushing her way through the crowd.

“Indeed.” Edward looked irritatingly composed.

“We’ll leave at once.”

“Home?”

“It’s too far.” And I am not sure I can wait that long to have you. “We’ll go back to my mother’s house.”

Edward looked faintly uneasy. “As you like.”

Daphne turned, tilting her head back to look up at him. Desire was making her breathless again. “I thought we could start with renegotiating the wedding night.”

A slow, hungry smile spread across his face. “You’ll get no complaints from me, wife.”

CHAPTER 27

There were a great many stares thrown their way as they pushed through the crowd.

Edward couldn't find it in himself to care. Why should he? Daphne had forgiven him. They were going to try. They were going to negotiate.

The other members of the ton could whisper and gossip all they liked. He didn't give a fig.

The footman by the large front door was flustered to see them there, obviously not expecting guests to begin leaving so soon.

"If... if you'll wait here a moment, Your Graces," the man stammered, "I'll have your carriage fetched. It might take ten minutes, or perhaps?—"

"Never mind that," Edward interrupted, taking Daphne's hand in his own. "We'll go find it ourselves."

"What?" the footman bleated, but his objections were already lost in the air as the two of them darted out into the night.

The heavy clouds had begun to clear away from the sky, revealing a full, yellowish moon and a speckling of stars. Daphne's fingers laced through his as though they were meant to be there.

Carriages were parked up in a long line, all facing away from the house. A few

coachmen and drivers remained with their vehicles, huddling together and talking in low voices. They glanced curiously at Edward and Daphne as they hurried past.

Edward leaned down to whisper in her ear, “I told the driver to wait with the carriage.”

His lips brushed her earlobe, and he felt a shiver run through her body.

“You told him to wait?” Daphne whispered back, laughing. “You knew I’d be coming back with you!”

“I knew no such thing. I reasoned that once I found you, one of two things would happen. You’d come back with me, or you’d refuse. Either way, I’d be leaving the party soon enough.”

“You,” she murmured, stopping to loop an arm around his neck, “are too clever for your own good.”

He grinned at that, hustling her a little further along to where the carriage waited, the familiar coat-of-arms etched on the side. The coachman was there, true to his word, and wordlessly climbed up into his seat. Edward pulled open the door, and Daphne tumbled into the fur-lined seats inside. He crawled in after her, closed the door, and they were on their way.

Just like that, they were locked inside the soft, silent box, rumbling quietly on its way. Edward sat on one side of the carriage, and Daphne sat on the other. They were both breathing heavily, some of the urgency dissipating between them. There was no light inside the carriage, and Daphne’s face was draped in shadow.

Silence landed between them, soft and overbearing. To his horror, Edward felt a combination of fear and anxiety washing over him.

She deserves better than me. So much better.

Daphne broke the silence first, making no move to reach out and touch him. It was as if there was a spell between them, keeping them apart.

“What does Alex’s letter say? It’s too dark to read it in here.”

Edward swallowed. “He said that he loved you and would very much like you to be his mother if you wanted it. He said that he missed you and wanted you to come back. He promised to make sure that I behaved myself if that was your concern.”

The moonlight illuminated the smile on Daphne’s face, tinged with sadness.

“He’s confused, you know. He’s just a child. He should have the chance to be a child.”

Edward nodded slowly. “I... I know that. I’ve come to understand it. I’ll do better.”

“He must know who his mother was, you know. I will love it if he loves me as a mother, but his real mother can’t be forgotten.”

“I will tell him about her. And I promised him he could spend more time with his aunt Beatrice. To do that, I think...” Edward swallowed, not quite able to believe he was going to say the words. “I think I’ll have to come back to London.”

Another smile spread across Daphne’s face. “We’ll come back to London? Truly?”

He sighed. “I’m afraid so. Can you bear it?”

She was beaming from ear to ear. “I’ll do my best.”

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“I don’t much... don’t much like people, you know. I find social situations difficult. Society has always been a chore to me. But when I locked myself up in my home, that didn’t make me feel whole, either. I can’t help but feel that with somebody beside me, somebody I love and trust, things might be different.” He met her eyes from across the dark carriage. “Somebody like you.”

She held his gaze for a long moment, then shifted to sit beside him. Tentatively, as if he might pull away, she took his hand.

“Whatever lies ahead,” she said carefully, “we’ll overcome it together. If you let me, that is.”

He held her gaze for a long moment, his eyes glittering in the moonlight. Gently, so gently, he lifted his hand and curled it around the back of her neck, pulling her forward to rest his forehead against hers.

“If I let you? I’d beg you to do just that. I am in love with you, my dear Duchess.”

The smile reappeared on her face. Her hand fluttered up to rest on his shoulder, and he could have sworn that he could feel the warmth of her palm through the fabric of his jacket.

“And perhaps I might see myself on the way to being in love with you, my darling Duke,” she responded, and he grinned back.

“Lovely. Nice and vague.”

“Well, that’s what Society is about, isn’t it? Being careful about what you say.”

“I’ve never been good at that.”

She gave a short laugh. “No, me neither. Perhaps we’ll get better at it as we get older.”

“Well, I for one hope not.”

She met his eyes again and leaned forward slowly, her lips barely brushing against his. Edward had only just closed his eyes, ready to receive the kiss, when the carriage lurched to a halt.

“Oh,” Daphne said, a trifle breathlessly, pulling back. “I think we’re here.”

“How lovely,” Edward said testily. “Might we not stay in the carriage?”

It was beyond strange, taking her husband upstairs to her childhood bedroom. Daphne couldn’t quite meet the eyes of the baffled servants they’d rushed past on the way up here.

Edward’s hand was warm and rough in hers, and all the desire from earlier had come rushing back in great, stuttering leaps, making her legs feel like jelly. It had occurred to her that the family might very well come back early from the ball, and then she would not put it past her sisters or her mother to barge into her room without knocking.

For some reason, this was remarkably funny.

Laughter bubbled up her chest, and she clapped her free hand over her mouth to smother it.

They reached the landing, with Edward tripping on the topmost step and stumbling. This was somehow funny too. Daphne pulled him close to her, chuckling, and wound her arms around him.

“Clumsy,” she whispered.

“I am remarkably nimble, my dear wife,” he murmured back, his arms closing around her waist. His palm flattened out against her back, warm and firm, and she felt almost dizzy with desire. “You’ll see just how nimble in a minute. Now, which is your room?”

Daphne stumbled the last few feet to her room, pushing open the door. To her chagrin, the room was dark and cold, the fire not lit and no candles ready. Not that it was the servants’ fault, of course. They weren’t expecting the family back for a while. It wasn’t as if Daphnewas cold, anyway.

She closed the door behind them and turned the lock.

Turning to face her husband, she leaned against the door, overcome by a rush of nerves and shyness.

“Should I light a fire?” Edward asked, his voice scratchier than usual.

“I’m not cold,” Daphne found herself saying. “At least, I don’t think I mind being cold. Is that a silly thing to say?”

“No. Not at all. I can summon a servant, get them to bring some candles, some food, some wine?—”

“No, not yet,” she interrupted, taking a tentative step forward.

Where had the nerves come from? Desire still pulsed through her, insistent and wanting, but now she found herself afraid for some reason.

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No, not afraid. There was no fear, only a pricking anxiety. She edged closer still, flattening her hands against the strong planes of his chest. One of his hands came up, curling around hers, and his other hand ghosted across her cheek.

“Turn around,” he whispered.

His voice made goosebumps rise over her skin. She obeyed, turning until her back was turned towards him. His hands ran briefly over her shoulders, darting across the back of her neck and down to the small of her back. On impulse, Daphne twisted up her hair, pulling it over her shoulder and out of his way.

When she felt his lips press against the nape of her neck, at the top of her spine, she closed her eyes, letting the sensation sink into her. She knew what was coming even before Edward began to tug at the laces binding the back of her dress.

Part of her had expected him to struggle on account of the ridiculous layers and tight knots, but her clothes progressively loosened, more and more until she could step away from him, turn back, and let the heavy folds of her dress slide down her shoulders and hips, leaving her in her petticoats and chemise.

Edward’s gaze skimmed down her form, hungry.

“You take something off now,” she heard herself say.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Giving me an order, wife?”

She grinned. “Maybe. Are you going to obey?”

“Of course.” He gave a flourishing bow that made her laugh. “You are aduchess.”

Straightening up nimbly, he stripped off his jacket in one smooth movement, then his cravat, and finally his waistcoat, dropping the expensively brocaded fabric into a pile on the floor.

“And the shirt,” Daphne added, unable to swallow back a flare of lust.

She’d seen him bare-chested before, of course, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to see it again.

He grinned wolfishly, his teeth glinting in the gloom. “Ah-ah-ah, my dear. Now it’s your turn.”

This, she thought, was a fair request.

Keen to get it over with, Daphne stripped off both of her petticoats, kicking the silky garments out of the way.

Now she was only wearing her chemise—a wantonly thin, little thing that did nothing to hide the way her nipples stiffened in the cold air.

It appeared that Edward had noticed that, too. His eyes darkening, he took a step forward, his fingers reaching out as if to ghost over the curve of her breast.

“Nowyou,” she said, a little more severely than she’d intended. Her breath was coming hard at the moment, it seemed.

Edward wasn’t smiling now. There was an urgency on his face, something hungry and eager. He stripped off his shirt without further ado, and the moonlight played over smooth, toned skin. Daphne reached out hesitantly, intending to touch him, but

before her fingers could make contact, she found herself swept off her feet and into a pair of strong arms. She was deposited on a firm, flat surface, her legs left dangling, and it took her a moment before she realized where she was.

“Is this the dresser?” she whispered.

“Maybe we should light the candles, after all,” Edward murmured, his lips a hair’s breadth from hers. “I’d like to see you, my dear.”

She looped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

“I like it this way,” she whispered. “Next time, we’ll have all the light you want. How about just one, then?”

“I can deny you nothing, it seems,” Edward responded, and there was a harsh, desperate quality to his voice now.

It almost hurt Daphne to let him go.

He prowled like a hungry tiger across to where a single candle stood on the mantelpiece. He lit it, filling the room with a buttery, flickering glow that cast thrilling, dancing shadows. Once they had some light, he came back to her, and she wrapped her arms around him again, almost trembling with eagerness.

He kissed her, and she closed her eyes, letting the dark take over. His tongue traced the seam of her lips and moved down to taste the sensitive skin of her throat. Daphne kept her eyes closed, each sensation seeming to be magnified in the darkness.

His fingers skimmed the tip of her shoulder, his palm briefly cupping the curve of her breast. It sent a wave of razor-sharp desire through her, and she breathed out, arching her back.

“You’re lovely,” Edward breathed, repeating what he’d said the first time they’d come together.

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His palm dropped to her hip, pleasingly warm against her skin, and with a deft movement, his hand slipped underneath the hem of her chemise.

Daphne shuddered in delight at the feeling of warm fingers on her bare skin. It seemed entirely natural for her thighs to open and frame his hips, one ankle hooking around the back of his thigh, pulling him against her.

Like before, his fingers brushed against the junction between her legs, making her jerk, a stifled whisper escaping her lips. This time, though, Edward withdrew his hand far too early.

“Are you ready, my love?” he whispered, pressing another kiss to the side of her neck.

“Yes,” she gasped. “I... I’m ready.”

There was a blunt press of something hot and firm against her core, a moment of discomfort as it slipped inside. Daphne breathed in, frowning, trying to adjust to the strange feeling.

“Do you need me to stop?” Edward whispered, his voice tight.

Her eyes were open now, but she could still hardly see anything in the darkness. When he brushed his fingers against her cheek, the pleasant surprise made her flinch and suck in a breath.

“No,” she breathed.

He began to move, slowly and carefully rolling his hips, and Daphne began to feel the familiar peak of her climax approaching once again, a pressure building up and up inside her. She closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and pressing her cheek against his neck.

Edward was growling deep in his throat, a noise that thrilled her so much she had no idea how to manage it. Her climax hit her with an almost jarring rush, pleasure and dizziness combining to make her feel as though she were drunk. She was vaguely aware of Edward's movements becoming erratic, his hips stuttering, his growls becoming louder.

Then, he gasped, tightening his grip on her, his fingers on her thighs digging in with a delicious rush of sensation, and then there was only the sound of their ragged breaths filling the room.

Edward pulled back, and she saw a sheen of sweat on his forehead.

"Daphne?" he whispered, his voice cracking. "Are you... Was that...?"

"It was excellent," she breathed. "I might, however, need you to carry me to the bed. I'm not sure my legs will work."

He chuckled, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "In that case, then, for heaven's sake, can we have a little light?"

They lay together in companionable silence. Candles were lit, of course, filling the room with a buttery, comforting glow. To avoid the embarrassment of summoning a servant to kindle a fire, Edward had kindled it himself. They were both propped up against the pillows, the sheets wound luxuriously around their bare bodies, tangled together. Daphne's head was resting on his chest, and Edward's cheek rested on the crown of her warm head, and he could not ever recall feeling happier.

There was a tinge of sadness to the happiness too. He suspected he would feel that way for a long time, every time he remembered his stepmother.

He had told Daphne everything, holding back nothing. She'd listened in absolute silence, and even shed a tear or two.

"You did the right thing," she said. "Clarissa did a terrible thing, but hanging her will only destroy the lives of more people. Yours and mine, for a start, to say nothing of Alex's."

Edward swallowed hard, closing his eyes. "Oh, poor Alex. He begged to know what had happened, but I told him I would only tell him when he was older."

"That was wise. A child shouldn't have to carry a burden like that."

"I keep thinking about one part of Clarissa's story," Edward murmured, shaking his head. "How, after she'd given my mother the poisoned cup, she tried to stop it. She told her to wait, not to drink, but it was too late. For the want of a few seconds, I wonder how different my life would have been."

Daphne placed her palm on his chest, right over where his heart beat beneath the bone and flesh.

"You'll go mad, thinking like that. The fact is that it did happen, and it cannot be changed. At least the truth is out. Perhaps that would have given your mother some comfort, at least."

He nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on the fire. "I'll open the gallery when we get home. It will do Alex good to look at his mother again. I won't let him obsess over her, however, any more than I would let him eat marzipan till he was sick."

“You’re a good father, and a kind man,” Daphne murmured, tilting back her head. “I take back what I said earlier, by the way. About starting to fall in love with you.”

He raised his eyebrows, glancing down at her. “Oh?”

“Indeed. If you must know, I am in love with you.”

He chuckled at that. “I’m rather glad about that, because I am in love with you, my dear Duchess.”

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“I am delighted to hear it again,” she said, grinning lazily. “Oh, I don’t know if you are aware of this, but speaking of love, in your very own household...”

“Are you referring to Peter Tinn and Mrs. Trench’s secret courtship? Yes, I’m aware.” Edward chuckled, shaking his head. “They think they’re very subtle, but they’re not.”

She grinned wider. “I think I’d be happy to see another wedding in our house. What do you think?”

“I think I agree, my dear Duchess.”

EPILOGUE

Two Weeks Later

Peter Tinn was, quite naturally, the referee.

“Ready... set...” he began, teasing the final go.

Daphne bit back a smile, throwing a wry look at her husband. Edward was grinning from ear to ear, shaking his head.

It was a fine day and a warm one. A perfect day for riding, really.

Or, more specifically, the perfect day for arace.

The route had been marked out from the edge of the house all the way to the tree line, where Mrs. Trench stood to make note of the winner. She'd even strung a strip of ribbon to mark the finish line.

As Daphne watched, she saw Mrs. Trench cast a fond, admiring glance at Peter, who flushed red when he caught it.

Grinning, Daphne caught Edward's eye, and a meaningful look passed between them.

"You two aren't concentrating!" Alex piped up in irritation. "This is very serious."

"I beg your pardon, my boy." Edward laughed. "I should have known that a horse race is not a thing to be taken lightly."

Alex narrowed his eyes, sure that he was being mocked but not quite able to work it out. "No, it certainly isn't. I'm going to win, though. I'm sure of it. Daffie said I was remarkably fast."

"I did say that," Daphne agreed, biting back a smile.

The hue and cry over the notorious Duke and Duchess of Thornbridge had not died down. The scandal sheets still mentioned them in every issue, and their 'odd' behavior at Mrs. Whitmore's ball had been discussed and dissected in almost every corner of the city. Mrs. Whitmore herself was demurely silent, as was the Duke and Duchess of Langdon, Octavia, and Emily.

It didn't bother Daphne. After all, that was London, and they were not in London.

They had only spent a few days in London after their renegotiated wedding night. Octavia and Emily had both cried over Daphne's departure.

“It’s as if I’m leaving home for the first time,” Daphne had remarked to Edward, snuggled up against him in the back of the carriage.

“In a way, you are,” he responded, kissing the top of her head.

She shed a few tears, of course, but nothing excessive. It was normal to miss a happy home, of course, but she had one ahead of her, just waiting to be discovered.

Alex was thrilled to see her again, and Daphne knew at once that she’d made the right decision. For more reasons than one.

She met Edward’s eyes over Alex’s head, which was bent down over the horse’s neck, fixed seriously on the route ahead.

Let him win,she mouthed.

Edward grinned, rolling his eyes.

I’ll try,he mouthed back.

You absolute...she began but was cut off by Peter Tinn.

“Go!” he shouted, jumping up and down.

Alex and his little pony shot forward, with Alex leaning forward, stiff as a board, his elbows sticking out comically on either side. Edward and Daphne followed at once.

Daphne leaned forward over her horse, enjoying the feel of the wind whipping through her hair, cooling her skin. She closed her eyes, trusting the horse to remain surefooted.

We’ll go to London at the start of the next Season. I’ll visit my mother. I’ll see how Emily is doing, and perhaps finally get to the bottom of what is going on with her and that Duke. I’ll see Beatrice’s baby. Alex can meet his cousin. Theodore and Stephen can reintroduce Edward to Society and help him make good friends.

All shall be well.

She opened her eyes, glancing across the lawn to find Edward watching her. He was not trying to ride too fast, that was clear, and a faint smile played on his lips. A rush of warmth and desire spread through Daphne’s chest. She thought she could understand now how Anna had been so drawn to Theodore. Love was a strange thing, quite incomprehensible at times, but it was powerful. Trying to fight it was like trying to fight gravity.

And she was in love with Edward. She felt almost foolish for not realizing it before. She’d been drawn to the wretched man almost from the moment she first saw him.

And to think I ran away from him! What a fool I was.

But then would he ever have understood the importance of renegotiation? Would things have worked out on their own or not?

There was no point in worrying about what-ifs and maybes. One would go mad that way.

Think about what is important. You have a family. A husband who adores you, a household that cares for you, and a son—a son!—who loves you with all his heart. We're safe. We're happy. We are in love.

Yes, she was lucky, indeed. And for a duke who was meant to be cursed, Edward was lucky, too.

Up ahead, Alex's horse cannoned across the finish line, and Mrs. Trench threw up her hands, beaming.

"Master Alexander is the winner!" she announced. "Fine riding, Master Alexander! Oh, Peter, didn't he do well?"

Peter Tinn, jogging up to stand beside her, smiled dotingly at her. "Remarkably well, Jemimah."

Edward and Daphne slowed to a trot, riding side by side.

"You should invite your mother and sisters to visit us," Edward said. "I know Beatrice is not traveling, what with her being so close to her due date, but I desperately want Alex to meet his cousin. And to get to know his aunt better."

Daphne smiled affectionately at him. "I'll write to them at once. Mama sends me letters every other day as it is. Emily had been strangely quiet, and that worries me. She is up to something, I just know it."

Edward shot her a look, which seemed to say that he knew more than he was letting on.

Daphne narrowed her eyes at him. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he demurred, but she shook her head.

“No, you know something. Tell me at once.”

He leaned out of the saddle and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Later,” he whispered, his voice heavy with promise.

An answering shiver rolled down Daphne’s spine, and she cleared her throat. “Very well then. I shall be patient.”

“You are never very patient, my dear Duchess,” he responded, smiling lazily.

“Papa! Daffie!” Alex shouted, out of the saddle and standing by the finish line with his hands on his hips.

“Well done, darling!” Daphne called.

Edward gave his son a smile. “I’m very proud of you, Alex.”

Alex growled. “Itoldyou not to let me win!”

The End?